



## THE FINAL FRONTIER

ROBERT BIGELOW  
& THE AFTERLIFE

UNDOING BAD THINGS RUEFUL MURDERER TURNS TO TIME TRAVEL

STICKS AND STONES A ROCK-THROWING POLTERGEIST IN BHUTAN

HAVE YOU GOT THE SCROLLS? NEW DEAD SEA DISCOVERIES

JACK THE STRIPPER • LAKE OF SKELETONS • BLUE DOGS • MAGNET-SWALLOWING KIDS

THE WORLD OF

STRANGE PHENOMENA

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# ForteanTimes

FT405 MAY 2021 £4.80

## DEAD RINGERS

MYSTERIOUS PHONE CALLS  
FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

Peter  
would like to FaceTime...

## RHYME AND UNREASON

JAMES MERRILL AND THE  
POETRY OF THE OUIJA BOARD

THE  
WORLD'S  
WEIRDEST  
NEWS



9 770308 589255

05



# spurious transients

# Something STRANGE

# Came Out Of The Skies

A documentary soundtrack  
concept album based  
on the real-life  
"Welsh Triangle"  
UFO incidents  
of 1977

Military Cover-Ups?

Close Encounters

Teleporting  
Cows

Silver  
Giants

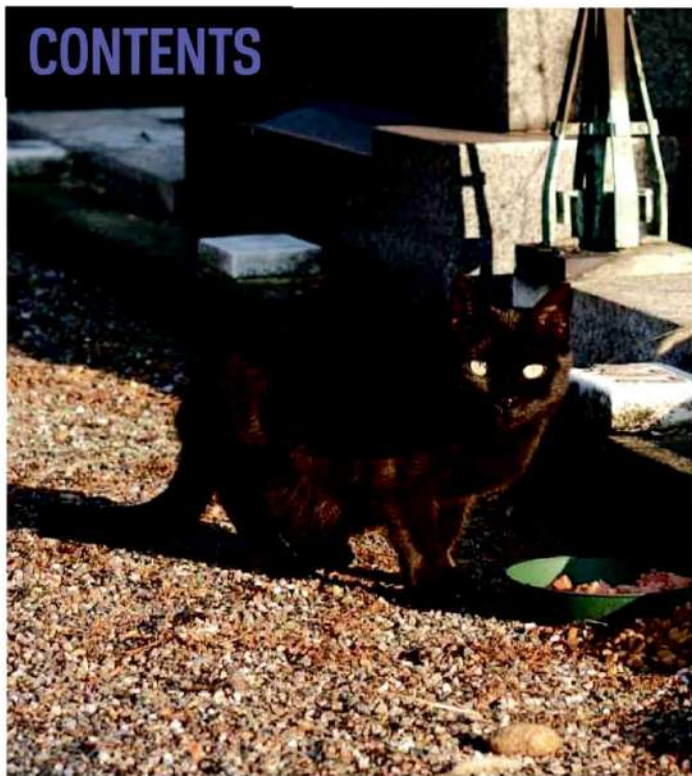
UFOs



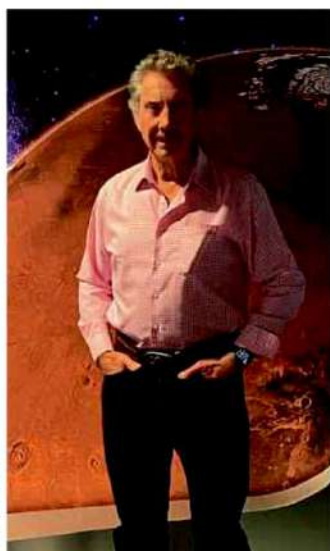
Sky blue coloured vinyl LP record available from:  
[spurioustransients.bandcamp.com](http://spurioustransients.bandcamp.com)



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COVER ILLUSTRATION: ETIENNE GILFILLAN  
THANKS TO JÓZSEF FAZEKAS & ZARA RAMSAY

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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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A digest of the worldwide weird, including: haunted hotel, super-oldies, Bhutan poltergeist, weird murders and much more.

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# EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

## VOICES FROM THE OTHER SIDE

This issue focuses on a perennial topic not just of fortean research but of religious, scientific and philosophical enquiry down the ages: what, if anything, lies on the other side of death? A second question, and one that often follows the first, is: can we communicate with it – or it with us?

The first question has been exercising billionaire Robert Bigelow for some time and has led him to follow a far stranger path than those usually trodden by rich philanthropists sitting on tech fortunes. While Bill Gates is trying to save the planet by sending balloons full of chalk dust to reduce solar radiation and decrease global warming (see p.16), Bigelow – who has previously poured his spare cash into various parapsychological projects – is more concerned with what happens when we leave this world: he is currently offering \$1.5 million in prize money for any researchers who can point to proof of the afterlife. Dr Leo Ruickbie had a long chat with him about what exactly we might find on the 'other side' (p.36).

Poetry, too, has often grappled with the mysteries of death and intimations of immortality, but rarely has its probing of the veil between realities yielded anything quite as eccentric as James Merrill's esoteric epic *The Changing Light at Sandover*, a voluminous postmodern epic that sprang from years' worth of sessions with a Ouija board. Eric Hoffman explores the strange new worlds Merrill discovered, and asks whether *Sandover* could really have been the product of dictating spirits or of vanity, subconscious desire and self-delusion (p.40).

Merrill's otherworldly interlocutors were an odd bunch, but at least they appeared to have a coherent, if sometimes worrying, agenda. What can we make, though, of the phantom voices that have been reported coming down the phone lines or, these days, sending phantom texts to our mobiles? D Scott Rogo's 1979 book *Phone Calls from the Dead* remains the classic, if controversial, study of such cases; but, as Theo Paijmans reveals, the phenomenon extends both backwards and forwards in time, with examples to be found from the earliest days of telephony to the age of the smartphone (p.30).

Many of these voices from beyond – from Merrill's fallen angels to Rogo's dead ringers – seem at times to possess a poltergeist-like sense of mischief, if not outright malice (elsewhere in this issue,



Paul Cropper reports on a more traditional, stone-throwing polt from the Himalayan country of Bhutan; p.14), but Helen Barrell finds that there's comfort to be had from some of the post-mortem presences we encounter – and that loved ones visiting from the other side are just as likely to be feline as human (p.55).

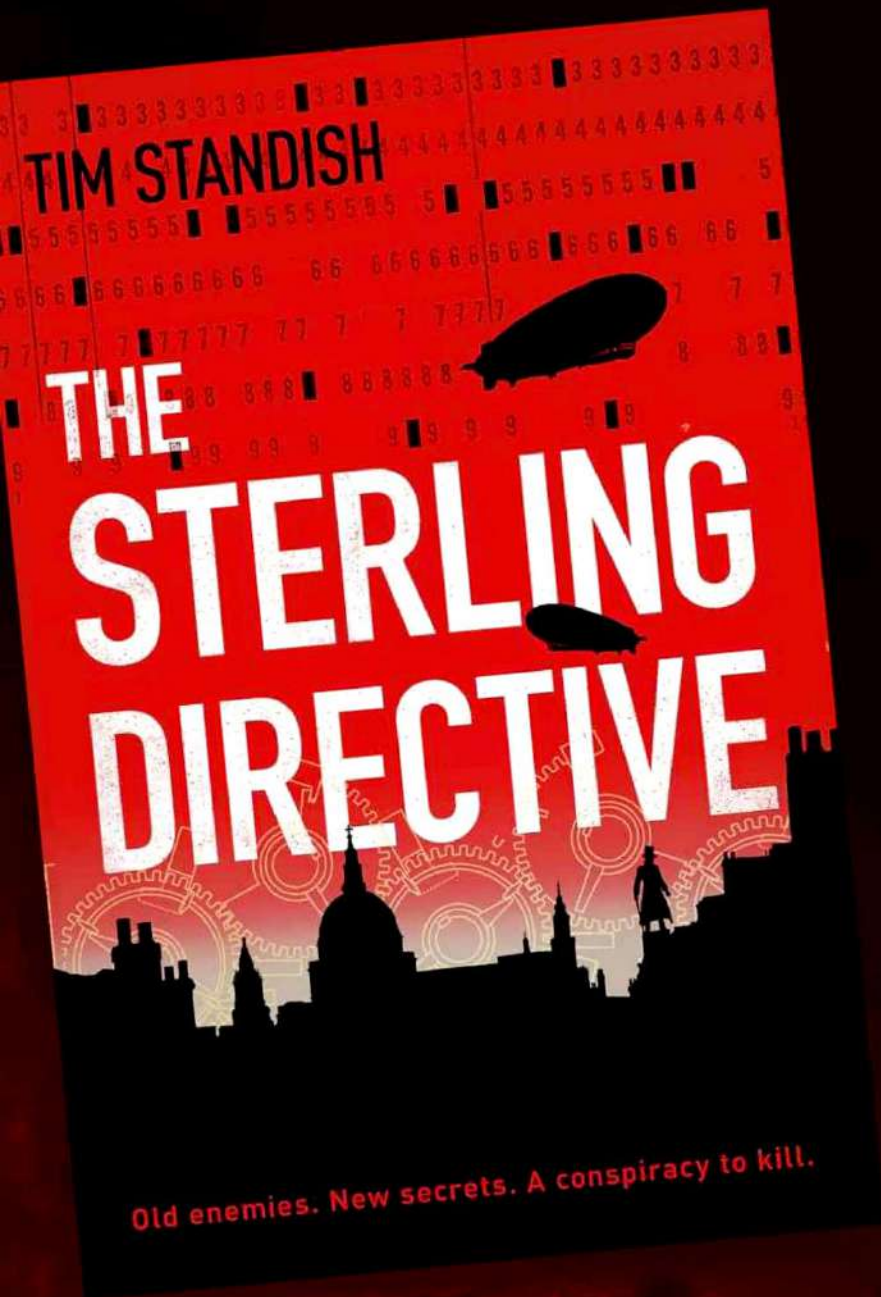
#### GETTING COPIES OF FT

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#### ERRATA

**FT401:19:** Gary Tavender, of Howden, East Riding, spotted a footballing error in Alan Murdie's account of four Millwall supporters camping on Cadbury Castle. "In 2011, Millwall were not even in the same division as Plymouth Argyle, but they did play against each other at Home Park in a cup match. This took place on 9 August 2011, not 29 as stated in the article."





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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

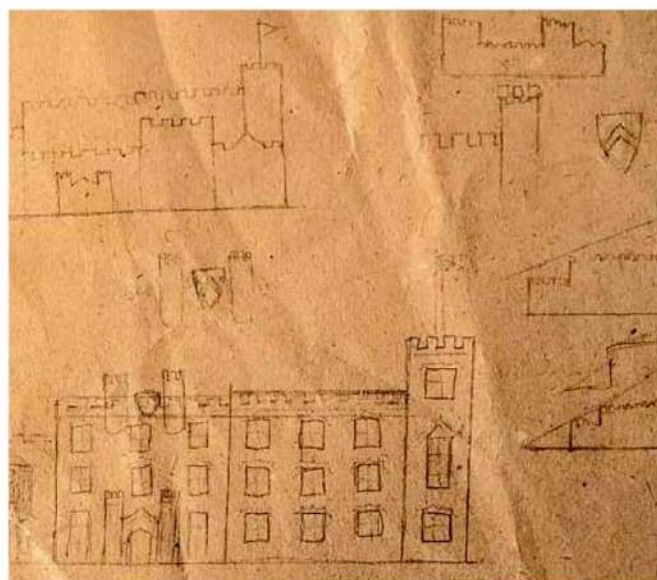
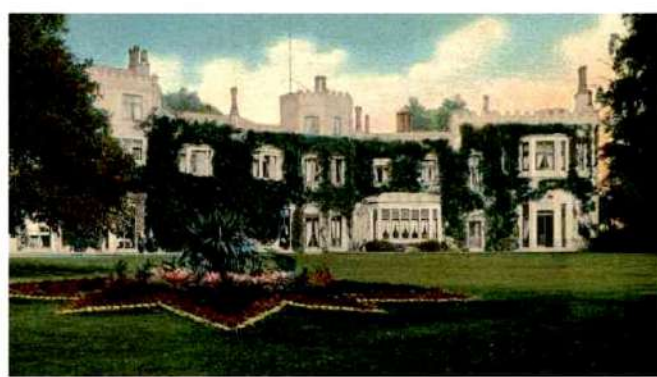
# STRANGE DAYS

## THE GHOSTS OF GLASSHAYES

Conan Doyle's 'haunted hotel' under threat from developers

In 1912, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle drew up plans for the redesign of Lyndhurst Park Hotel, formerly known as Glasshayes House, situated in the village of Lyndhurst in Hampshire's New Forest. According to blueprints rediscovered four years ago, the best-selling Sherlock Holmes author had intended each section of the hotel's frontage – its rising turrets, crenels and towers – to represent the various stages of the soul's passage through and after life. In accordance with his Spiritualist beliefs, the various sections were identified on the sketched plan as: 'life', 'death', 'afterlife', 'spirits in harmony' and lastly, 'higher spiritual place'. The sketch was signed "ACD". This document was unearthed by local historian Brice Stratford in Conan Doyle's archives.

Glasshayes House was famous for being haunted, probably the reason why Conan Doyle was such a keen and regular visitor, holding séances in the octagonal tower of the building with its then manageress, Mary Ryland, a keen Spiritualist. Local tradition speaks of the 'Ghosts of Glasshayes', a number of whom were apparently first spotted by builders working on extensions to the site, both at the beginning of the 20th century and in the 1970s. The most frequently-sighted spectre was that of Richard Fitzgeorge de Stacpoole, the first Duc de Stacpoole, who allegedly berated and sometimes attacked builders for disturbing his property. It is said that every year on the night of his death (7 July), strange music can be heard in certain rooms; the



TOP: Glasshayes House, later the Lyndhurst Park Hotel, as it appeared in the early 20th century. ABOVE: Some of Arthur Conan Doyle's sketches for the redesign of the hotel in 1912, which included a third floor extension and a new front facade.

*The ghosts were first spotted by builders working on extensions*

source is said to be a grand ball that the Duc holds annually for the dead.

During the 1912 construction work, which added new extensions to the building, seven 'Glasshayes Devil Squares' were placed over the entrance, each one signifying a separate ghost

sighting during construction. Other ghost sightings include that of Mrs Buck, for whom Glasshayes was built between 1806 and 1816 by her husband George Buck, and who died there in 1826. Another phantom is said to be the ghost of a chambermaid who hanged herself after an affair with a cook.

Now, the Victorian Society plans to use Mr Stratford's discovery in its efforts to oppose redevelopment plans which would see owners Hoburne Development converting the building into 77 apartments and 8 holiday homes. In a letter to New Forest National Park Authority, the Society explained how since the 2017 discovery of the drawing "more evidence has been uncovered" that "demonstrates how the design for the front facade was based on the Spiritualist view of the journey of the soul. This is a bizarre, yet fascinating feature which should be championed as an asset to the building and highlighted in any scheme; the building is now not only a unique example of Conan Doyle's architectural work, but also a tangible representation of his spiritual beliefs."

Although the Victorian Society welcomed the developer's decision to restore and keep elements of the facade, it opposes plans to remove a "significant" section of the "afterlife" part of the building, as well as the tower representing the "higher spiritual place". To date, Hoburne Development have not responded to requests for comment, but they have told planners they will retain the most historic part of the building if granted approval for their proposed redevelopment. *BBC News, 25 Feb; D.Telegraph, 20 Mar 2021.*





## WORLD'S OLDEST FOLK

Celebrating the world's super-centenarians

PAGE 10



## SUPER SOLDIERS

How genetic editing could change warfare

PAGE 17



## A "HORRIBLE MISTAKE"

Regretful killer seeks help with time travel

PAGE 25

# YOU WIN SOME, YOU LOSE SOME...

## One man's cryptocurrency disaster, plus an unexpected windfall of heroin

### BITTERCOIN

In 2011, San Francisco-based computer programmer Stefan Thomas was given 7,002 bitcoins as a reward for making a video explaining how the cryptocurrency works. At the time each bitcoin was worth \$2-\$6. Mr Thomas stored them away in his digital 'wallet' and forgot all about them. Currently, however, each bitcoin is now worth \$56,000, so the total is worth around \$395 million. Unfortunately, during the intervening decade, Mr Thomas had forgotten the password to access his IronKey hard drive (which contains his private keys to the bitcoins). He's already entered the wrong password eight times, and if his next two guesses are also incorrect, the hard drive will be encrypted and he'll never be able to get his hands on his \$395m fortune.

"I would just lie in bed and think about it," he told the *New York Times*. "Then I would go to the computer with some new strategy, and it wouldn't work, and I would be desperate again." He says the frustrating experience has put him off cryptocurrencies for good. "This whole idea of being your own bank... Let me put it this way, do you make your own shoes? The reason we have banks is that we don't want to deal with all those things that banks do."

After reports of Mr Thomas's dilemma appeared in international news sources, Internet security expert Alex Stamos based at Stanford Internet Observatory said he could crack the password within six months in return for a 10 per cent fee. With such enormous sums of money at stake, he advised Mr Thomas and anyone else in a similar plight not to try guessing a password with the risk of being locked out permanently. "Take it to professionals to buy 20 IronKeys and spend six months



LEFT: Stefan Thomas – still smiling.

finding a side-channel or uncapping," Mr Stamos said on Twitter. "I'll make it happen for 10 per cent. Call me."

However, a glance at Stefan Thomas's own Twitter account suggests he has not yet been able to access his fortune. Perhaps surprisingly, he seems remarkably sanguine about the whole affair, despite numerous tweets advising him to try 'password123', 'admin' or '123456' to unlock his hard drive. Other people have tweeted to him, claiming that they know his password, having seen in a vision or dream. He appears to take all these suggestions in good spirit.

In 2013, Welsh IT worker James Howells accidentally threw out a hard drive containing the keys to 7,500 bitcoins. At the time, the lost bitcoins were worth about £4 million. Now, they would be worth over £300 million. The price of Bitcoin fluctuates like any other currency, and has risen sharply by over 700 per cent since early 2020 and the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Cryptocurrency data firm Chainalysis has estimated that around 20 per cent of the extant 18.5m bitcoins in circulation (20 per cent would currently

equate to around \$208 billion) appears to be either lost, or is languishing in inaccessible 'wallets' whose passwords have been forgotten. *Guardian*, 12 Jan 2021.

### TRUNK JUNK

Blundering police officers sold a car they had seized from drug dealers – but left \$300,000 worth of heroin inside. Rick Joyner of Madison County, Alabama, bought the Ford Taurus for \$500 on a government auction site. He wanted a cheap first car for his foster son, Tyrese Allen. Because he was aware it had previously belonged to drug dealers, Mr Joyner, having travelled to Nashville, Tennessee, to collect his new purchase, asked if the car had been checked with a sniffer dog. "Nah, we got it all, don't worry about it," came the official's reply. "Whatever is in there, it's yours," he added.

It was only when Mr Joyner returned home that they discovered the Ford's bonus feature.

"We started pulling all this stuff out of the trunk and I saw this Walmart bag and I pulled it up and it had two bundles of something that was taped really, really heavy," he explained. "I was looking at it and I thought, 'Something don't look right with this'." He called Madison County Sheriff's Office, whose deputies arrived and informed him that the package contained two kilos of heroin. They confiscated the narcotic and thanked Mr Joyner for his honesty. *Metro*, 15 Jan 2021.

## EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

**NAKED MAN FOUND STUCK IN IOWA CHIMNEY, BLAMES FAILED GAME OF HIDE-AND-SEEK**

ABC News, 28 May 2016.

**Mermaid tail poses risk**

Sunday Courier-Mail (Sydney), 20 Dec 2015.

**WE NEED A CITIZENS' ARMY TO COMBAT ALIEN PESTS – MPs**

D.Mail, 25 Oct 2019

**Ghost workers cost the civil service £198m**

<I> 12 Dec 2018.

**'ANGRY' ALLIGATOR VISITS US FAMILY'S HOME**

BBC News, 30 April 2020.

**Meteorite displayed at UK museum will be going back to Mars**

D.Telegraph, 27 July 2020.



## SIDELINES...

### FELINY ASSAULT

An ex-con is back in jail after allegedly striking her male roommate in the face with a cat. Wendi Hird, 56, and her 73-year-old victim were once lovers but are now platonic friends. After a "verbal argument" at their Largo, Florida home, police say Hird took their cat and threw it at the victim's head, causing it to scratch him. Hird then herself struck the man in the face. She was arrested for domestic battery on a person over 65, a felony. *thesmokinggun.com* 2 Mar 2021.

### TYRELESS

Alex Oates, 24, drove his Fiat Punto on a motorway with no tyres. An off-duty cop saw sparks flying from all four wheels and called 999. At one stage, Oates stopped and tried pushing the car along the M65 motorway in Lancashire. Drink had been taken. Oates admitted he was a 'moron'. *Sun*, 28 Sept 2020.

### PAVED WITH GOLD

Horsham District Council is reviewing CCTV footage after reports that a large section of pavement was stolen from Storrington, a West Sussex village. Dozens of paving slabs were found to be missing and the council have reported the theft to Sussex Police. *BBC News*, 3 Mar 2021.

### GULL GOT YOUR TONGUE?

An argument between two strangers in an Edinburgh street turned feral when Bethaney Ryan, 27, attacked James McKenzie and bit off part of his tongue. When Mr McKenzie spat out the chunk of tongue, he was horrified to see a seagull swoop down and eat it. *dailyrecord.co.uk*, 21 Feb 2021.



## COVID CORNER | Tragedy in Brazil, ignorance in Iran, and another unusual Covid cure fails in India



ABOVE: Aruká Juma, the last surviving male from the Juma indigenous group, has died from Covid-related complications.

### LAST OF THE JUMA

The last surviving male from an exterminated Brazilian indigenous group has died from complications associated with Covid-19. Aruká Juma died in February aged between 86 and 90, the last Juma man who remained from a tribe once numbering 15,000 people. Repeated massacres in the 20th century meant that by 2002, just five Juma people were left – Mr Juma, his three daughters and a grandchild.

At the start of the pandemic many indigenous groups sought to cut themselves off from the outside world by closing roads and turning away visitors.

Unfortunately, these attempts at isolation failed, and the coronavirus is now widespread among indigenous communities. 162 tribes from a total of 305 have been affected. Brazil's indigenous population is thought to number 900,000, of whom at least 50,000 have been infected, with nearly 1,000 deaths, according to Government figures.

Brazil's indigenous groups are particularly vulnerable to Covid-19 because of their isolation, communal way of life and poor healthcare provision.

The country's federal indigenous health service, Sesai, may have contributed to the problem, with reports claiming that in at least three regions the virus was introduced by infected Sesai workers, many of whom were forced to work without adequate protective equipment or access to testing. Indigenous groups, many of whom have remained officially 'uncontacted', are threatened by encroachment from miners and agricultural businesses, which have grown worse under President Bolsonaro's government.

As a teenager in the 1960s, the late Mr Juma witnessed a massacre of his people when rubber tappers and tropical nut traders intruded on their land, killing over 60 people and leaving only seven Juma alive. Over subsequent decades he campaigned for federal recognition for the Juma's land, and his eldest daughter Borehá Juma intends to continue her father's struggle.

"I want to become like him now, to fight like my father," she said. "My father was a warrior. He was chief, I was chief and now the lineage is over." *D. Telegraph*, 19 Feb; *nbcnews.com*, 12 Mar 2021.

### LOCKDOWN WOE FOR SPIES

Ken McCallum, the new head of MI5 (Britain's domestic security service) has said Britain's spies have found it harder to track suspects during the pandemic and lockdowns because of a lack of crowds in city centres caused by fewer people travelling in for work, shopping or entertainment. "You wouldn't expect me to get into detail, but common sense will tell you that covert surveillance is not straightforward on near-empty streets," he explained, addressing the impact of the pandemic on the intelligence agency. "Our people are showing huge dedication and imagination in continuing to provide the essential service the country needs from us."

At a virtual press conference, McCallum told journalists that terrorists had adjusted their targets as a result of the pandemic. "The big shifts in everyone's lives – reduced travel, more online, and the rest – mean shifts in how our adversaries are operating," he said. "Fewer crowds mean terrorists look at different targets; online living means more opportunities for cyber hackers; and so on." *cnn.com*, 15 Oct 2020.





## VACCINE TURNS YOU GAY

"Don't go near those who have had the COVID vaccine," wrote Iranian cleric Ayatollah Abbas Tabrizian on the social messaging app Telegram. "They have become homosexuals." LGBTQ campaigner Peter Tatchell criticised the remarks, saying: "Ayatollah Tabrizian combines scientific ignorance with a crude appeal to homophobia," and Iranian dissident Sheina Vojoudi described Tabrizian and his fellow Iranian clerics as "suffering from lack of knowledge and humanity. Actually," she continued, "his goal of spreading nonsense is to try to scare people off getting vaccinated, while the leader of the regime and other officials got Pfizer, and they don't provide it for the people with the excuse that they don't trust the West."

Ayatollah Tabrizian has made other controversial statements about Western medicine. A video disseminated in January 2020 showed him burning the US textbook Harrison's Manual of Medicine, while claiming that Islamic medicine rendered such books "irrelevant". Homosexuality is punishable by death in Iran, and it is thought that thousands of gay people have been executed in the country since the 1979 revolution. Ayatollah Tabrizian has almost 210,000 Telegram followers. *D.Mail*, 9 Feb 2021.

## MESSING IN A MAZDA

Police issued a £200 fixed penalty fine in February 2021 to a man found sitting naked in his car without a reasonable excuse for breaching Covid stay-at-home regulations. They also fined another man who was sitting clothed in another stationary vehicle in the same car park near Calke, Derbyshire. The naked man claimed he had taken several wrong turns after making a journey to buy a pack of wet wipes. In an attempt to underline the message that people should only make essential journeys, the police safer neighbourhood team detailed the incident in a Facebook post with the heading 'Naked man found messing in a Mazda'. The post described how

officers "challenged the nude male, asking him why he was in a closed car park. The male was unable to provide a reasonable excuse of [sic] why he was stark naked in the car park during the height of a national lockdown." Police said he did not have any mental health problems. He was also issued with a Community Protection Notice warning, insisting he wears clothes in public places.

The same policing team also issued £200 fixed penalty notices to a "courting couple" who had enjoyed a "peck in a Peugeot" at Staunton Harold Reservoir. The man had travelled more than 100 miles (160km) from Lancashire to his girlfriend's home in Leicestershire to pick her up; they then drove to the Derbyshire beauty spot. The safer neighbourhood team's Facebook page recounted how the couple's private moment was interrupted when challenged by officers. The fines were issued as the couple were not in a support bubble and their journey not deemed an essential one. The busy police team also posted about fining a couple who were enjoying a "fumble in a Fiat" at Mercia Marina. Officers pointed out to the couple that they were "not involved in essential exercise". *BBC News*, 8 Feb 2021.

## MUDDY PUDDLE MUDDLE

A politician from Rajasthan state filmed himself sitting shirtless in a puddle of mud while blowing a conch shell,

claiming these actions would aid immunity to coronavirus. He has subsequently tested positive for SARS-CoV-2. Indian MP Sukhbir Singh Jaunapuria had claimed that a more natural approach to life would boost the immune system. "Go out, get wet in the rain, sit in the dirt, work on the farm, blow a conch... and eat 'desi' [indigenous Hindi] things. One gains immunity from doing these things," he says in a video he shared on his Facebook page a month prior to testing positive for coronavirus, one of 24 Indian MPs to do so. The country has now reached over 11.5 million infections, with more than 159,000 deaths.

But Mr Jaunapuria is not the only politician to have proposed an unusual cure for coronavirus. Belarus president Aleksander Lukashenko said in 2020 that riding tractors, drinking vodka and taking saunas would prevent Covid, before he too tested positive. Mexico's president Andrés Manuel López Obrador announced that he was carrying amulets that protected him from the disease, while Puebla Governor Luis Miguel Barbosa Huerta claimed that poor people were immune. Suman Haripriya, another Indian politician from the state of Assam, suggested that cow urine and dung could be used to sterilise infected areas, while Yogi Adityanath, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, proposed the regular practice of yoga as a cure. *D.Mail*, 17 Sep 2020.



ABOVE: The conch-blowing MP Sukhbir Singh Jaunapuria in his puddle.

## SIDELINES...

### CURTAINS FOR PESSIMIST

Bob Rogers, a well-known figure at Speakers' Corner in London, has died aged 75. A Notting Hill resident and champion of civil liberties, he had been a fixture in Hyde Park since 1963. Known as Bob Doom, he wore a placard with a headline taken from a newsstand in Piccadilly in 1991 that read: "IT'S GOING TO GET WORSE". *Sun*, 19 Jan 2021.

### TRANSPORT WHIZZ

Six-year-old Nathan Henry-McGhie has leant the 152-page Highway Code off by heart and can name all the stops on the London Underground. He was diagnosed with autism in February 2021, has a photographic memory and a fascination with transport. "When he was two, he could count up to 100," said his proud mother. *Sun*, 6 Nov 2021.

### CALF PORTENT

A calf born with two heads in Panega village, Rajnandgaon in central India, was inundated with worshippers who left gifts. Each head had two eyes, but the creature had only three ears. *Metro*, *Sun*, 10 Sep 2020.

### TALE OF THE TAPE

A 79-year-old Thai man complaining of stomach pains was scheduled for surgery to remove a tumour. A gastroscopy was conducted beforehand, but when the camera was removed, it was found to be attached to a tapeworm that had been living in the man's intestines. As surgeons kept pulling, the worm was revealed to be a full 2m (6.5ft) in length. Tapeworms can occur after the consumption of uncooked pork, beef or buffalo meat. *thaivisa.com*, 5 Feb 2021.

### HAUNTED SCHOOLROOM

When a building at King Edward VI High School for Girls in Birmingham was brought back into use due to Covid distancing measures, pupils felt a sense of dread and heard knocking. A porter saw a statue move. In the classroom below, Mary Bridgeman, 16, said: "We regularly hear a sudden gust of wind in the corridor outside, then the door's flung open." The girls have started an investigation. *D.Telegraph*, 21 Dec 2020.





# STRANGE DAYS

## SIDELINES...

### EMERGENCY POWERS

Nora McManus-Chambers, 55, who is only 4ft 10in (147cm) tall, lifted a 440lb (200kg) ride-on mower off a neighbour stuck face down in a stream. Stephen Machin said Nora saved his life after his mower skidded down a bank in Grosmont, South Wales. *Metro*, 24 July 2020.

### LOST IN ICE

A US Navy meteorologist found his wallet 53 years after he lost it in the Antarctic. Paul Grisham joined Operation Deep Freeze in 1967 on a 13-month assignment. His wallet, containing his Navy ID card, driving licence, a beer ration punch card and a tax statement, was re-discovered during demolition work at McMurdo base on Ross Island. *Guardian*, 6 Feb 2021.

### TORTOISE NEWS

A runaway tortoise wandered into a police station last July. A Twitter appeal found his owner in Exeter. A tortoise belonging to Fredaricka West of Pontefract, West Yorkshire, is thought to be 120 years old and might be Britain's oldest pet. *Metro*, 23 July; *Sun*, 21 Sept 2020.

### BEGGARS BELEAF

One of Britain's oldest trees has changed sex after 3,000 years. A 55ft (17m) yew beside St Meugan's church near Brecon, mid-Wales, has always produced small cones, a sign of being male; but last year it was growing red berries, indicating it is now female. This could be a response to stress or a change in environment. *Sun*, 28 Nov 2020.

### MEGA ZAPS

Electric eels have been seen hunting in groups and delivering a synchronised zap to their prey. The creatures, which can generate 860 volts each, were thought to be solitary until the discovery in Brazil. *Metro*, 15 Jan 2021.



## MEDICAL BAG

This month's expert medical advice: don't eat magnets, batteries or fireworks...



KENNEDY NEWS AND MEDIA

ABOVE: An X-ray revealed that Rhiley Morrison (above right) had swallowed 54 small magnets; fortunately, they were all removed.

### MAGNET-SWALLOWING CHILDREN

A 12-year-old boy underwent a life-saving operation after deliberately swallowing 54 magnets. Rhiley Morrison, from Prestwich, Greater Manchester, wanted to see if metal would stick to his stomach and so ate magnetic balls on two separate occasions. After he told his mother, Ms Paige Ward, about his dangerous experiment, she took him to Salford Royal Hospital. An X-ray revealed 54 of the magnet toys were inside his stomach and bowel. Rhiley was then sent by ambulance to Royal Manchester Children's Hospital, where doctors, fearing that the powerful magnets might burn through his tissue or vital organs with the potential for fatal internal damage, removed the objects during a six-hour keyhole surgery procedure.

Initially, when the balls had not reappeared after four days, Rhiley told his mother he had swallowed two of the metal spheres by accident; but he later admitted he had swallowed 54 of them out of curiosity, both to see if magnets inside his body would enable metal objects to adhere to his skin, and also curious about what they would look like when he passed them. Having been discharged after a

*"I wanted to see if this copper would stick to my belly"*

16-day-stay in hospital, Rhiley was recovering at home. His mother hoped the story of his ordeal might help warn parents about the potential dangers of magnetic ball toys, explaining that due to magnet-ingesting complications, Rhiley had been forced to endure 10 days unable to move without vomiting a green liquid which was caused by his leaking bowel. In addition, she said, he had been unable to eat or go to the toilet, and needed to be tube-fed and have a catheter inserted.

"I was gobsmacked, just speechless when I heard the number he'd swallowed," she said. But Ms Ward explained that Rhiley is "massively into science, he loves experiments," and that he had eventually admitted to her: "I tried to stick magnets to me. I wanted to see if this copper would stick to my belly while the magnets were in." She added: "It's just so silly, but he's a child... He also thought

it would be fun seeing them come out the other end." She explained that although Rhiley has been diagnosed as having autism and ADHD: "He's quite high functioning. He knows what he's doing, he knows right from wrong."

Rhiley had asked for magnet toys for Christmas and had bought more from a corner shop with money he had saved up. Ms Ward believes he swallowed the first batch on 1 January 2021 and the second on 4 January. He became worried the next day when none of the magnets had yet passed through his system, and woke his mother at 2am on 5 January, when she rushed him to hospital. She was anxious that hospital staff might blame her for Rhiley's predicament, but was reassured by a trauma nurse who told her that "she deals with kids like Rhiley who've eaten magnets all the time."

"I don't want other kids or parents going through that," Ms Ward said. "Magnets aren't toys, they shouldn't be sold as toys... The surgeon said that Rhiley... could have died. Rhiley was lucky but some kids aren't and won't be." In footage filmed from his bed during his stay in hospital, Rhiley said: "My advice is never, ever eat magnets – bin them."





Last year, a doctor from Stockport issued an open letter to parents warning them of the potentially fatal results of the magnetic ball craze: "Apparently, some children have been creating a larger ball using numerous balls and putting them in their mouth, then placing other balls on the outside of their face," the letter explained. "They then use their tongue to move the larger ball in their mouth to make the balls on their face move, which understandably kids find amusing. However, some of the individual balls in their mouth can come away and be accidentally swallowed. The balls are highly magnetic and can cause severe damage to the digestive tract. As the balls move through the bowel, they can magnetise together even when in different parts of the bowel. The pressure applied to the bowel tissue lying between the two magnets is so strong that it causes a perforation in the bowel. This is extremely serious and can be fatal if not identified and promptly fixed by abdominal surgery."

The doctor said he was aware of at least four other children who had required surgery because of magnet-swallowing, including a six-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy. In 2020, three-year-old Tomás Quinn from Newry in Northern Ireland needed emergency surgery to remove 29 tiny magnetic balls, as well as having part of his intestine removed. And according to Belfast's Royal Hospital for Sick Children, 19 children between the ages of two and 14 required medical treatment for magnet ingestion in 2019; three had to have major surgery, including a three-year-old boy from whose stomach 49 magnets were removed, and a 13-year-old girl who needed to have a section of her intestine cut away. *BBC News, 11 Aug 2020; D.Mail, 8 Feb 2021.*

## BATTERY DANGER

A 26-year-old prison inmate was taken to the emergency department of Santa Maria Nuova Hospital in Florence, Italy, complaining of stomach pains.

He had deliberately swallowed an AA battery two hours before admission. Doctors performed an EKG; electrodes on the chest record the heart's electrical activity and present it as a graph. In this case the graph indicated that the man was having a type of heart attack characterised as 'ST segment elevation'. This shows a certain segment of the EKG, normally flat, being instead elevated.

The inmate reported no symptoms of a heart attack (such as shortness of breath), and his levels of cardiac troponin (proteins released into the blood during a heart attack), were normal. The only risk factor he reported was cigarette smoking.

Previous case reports document a man who swallowed six AAA batteries, and another man who swallowed 18 AA batteries. In each of these cases their respective EKG readings were altered. It is not known for sure how battery ingestion can mimic heart attack. One suggestion is that the battery's contact with stomach acid could produce an electric current that travels to the heart and affects the EKG.

In this case, the man suffered no complications, but doctors advise against the practice of swallowing batteries. The prolonged electrical effects, they say, could damage the heart. Battery consumption may also be hazardous as it could potentially block the windpipe or cause an intestinal obstruction. *livescience.com, 23 Nov 2020.*

## SNAP, CRACKLE & BANG

A Warwickshire mother was left with a cracked tooth and chemical burns to her lip and mouth after she ate some fireworks in the mistaken belief that they were sweets. Lisa Boothroyd, 48, said she thought the miniature fireworks, called Fun Snaps, were popping candy. "I remember the moment I crunched down on a handful of the 'sweets' – and instantly felt explosions in my mouth," she recalled. "I felt a burning pain

straight away. I'm still in agony and nearly lost a tooth after it cracked from the explosion."

The packet of mini fireworks has the slogan 'Snap! Crack! Bang!' alongside their 'Fun Snaps' name, which Mrs Boothroyd said had led her to assume they were popping candy. "I had no idea what was happening," she told a reporter, criticising the Costcutter shop from which she had purchased the fireworks for having placed them among the children's sweets. Because the packaging was similar, it was an easy mistake to make, she claimed, explaining: "I had no idea what fun snaps even were. I just can't believe how much damage those little 'snaps' did to my mouth... Who knows what could have happened if a child had made the same mistake as me?"

A Costcutter spokesperson said: "The safety of shoppers is our main priority, so we were very concerned to hear about this incident. We have spoken to the independent retailer who operates this store under our Costcutter brand fascia and they have assured us they will remove this item from the confectionary section with immediate effect." *birminghammail.co.uk, 18 Jan 2021.*



## PENSIONER ATE POT-PLANT SOIL TO SURVIVE

After falling at her home and fracturing her wrist, Rosemary Frank, 91, spent two days on her bedroom floor before a care volunteer came to her rescue after she had missed a hair salon appointment. Mrs Frank was found semi-conscious and suffering from severe dehydration, with soil inside her stomach. It is believed she must have ingested the pot plant soil for its nutrients and moisture out of desperation induced by her dehydrated state. "I [came to] face down in a pile of soil with it all around my mouth and face. I must have looked a right sight for sore eyes," she said. Doctors said she had been just "six hours from death". Following a 10-day stay in hospital, Mrs Frank is now back home and recovering from her ordeal. *D.Telegraph, 11 Nov 2020.*

## SIDELINES...

### CAR TROUBLE

Thai police received a report of a car covered in panties, bras and sanitary pads. The driver was a 41-year-old woman who had been spotted driving around a crowded market. She had lost her job due to the pandemic, and had just discovered that her husband was having an affair. Her unusual car decor was designed to shame him in public, but officers ruled her behaviour inappropriate and asked her to take down her panties and remove her sanitary towels. *thaivisa.com, 9 Feb 2021.*

### NASTY NIP

Siraphop Masukarat, 18, watching videos while sitting on the lavatory in Nonthaburi, Thailand, felt a searing pain and found a 4ft (1.2m) python attached to his penis. "I stood up, which pulled the snake with me," he said. "I ran out, knocking the snake down by shutting the door." He needed four stitches. *Sun, 10 Sept 2020.*

### NARROW ESCAPE

An unnamed farmer who fell into a 60ft (18m) sinkhole near Stank Lane in Barrow, Cumbria, on 4 March is thought to have survived by falling onto his quad bike. He had been riding across a field when the sinkhole opened up, and was pulled to safety after a four-hour rescue operation. There are several abandoned 19th century iron ore mines in the area. *D.Telegraph, 6 Mar 2021.*

### TOWER QUEEN MISSING

Merlina, the Tower of London's "Queen" raven, is missing, presumed dead. She vanished in late December, leaving only seven other ravens. Though Merlina had often roamed outside the walls, the free-spirited bird had previously always returned to the Tower and to the Ravenmaster. *Sun, 14 Jan 2021.*

### COUNTRY CONFUSION

Mariana Minea, 30, from Trowbridge in Wiltshire, was caught driving at 103mph (166km/h) on the M4 motorway. She had just returned from Romania and told magistrates: "I didn't realise I was in England so I didn't pay any attention to the speed." *Sun, 19 Nov 2020.*



## SIDELINES...

### PAID TO DO NOTHING

Japanese graduate Shoji Morimoto started renting himself out to other people "to do nothing" and was inundated with offers. He makes up numbers at a gaming session, accompanies couples as they file for divorce, or listens to stressed workers talk about their jobs. He has received over 3,000 requests since 2018, and charges 10,000 yen for each one fulfilled. *Mainichi*, 11 Jan 2021.

### CHUCKY ALERT

A Texas public safety department issued an alert asking citizens to watch out for Chucky – the evil possessed doll from the Child's Play horror film series. The emergency warning said 'Chucky' was a suspect in a kidnapping, describing him as 28, with auburn hair, blue eyes, 3ft 1in (94cm) tall and weighing 16lb (7kg). The Amber Alert system sends alerts to people's mobile phones, typically to help find a missing child. Queried as to why the message had been sent three times, the department said it had been the result of a "test malfunction". *Guardian*, 3 Feb 2021.

### PRODIGIOUS LAMB

A sheep on a Belgian farm has had sextuplets, a one-in-5-million event. The six lambs, from a farm in Riemst, Limburg, followed a quintuplet birth at the same farm, a few days earlier, itself a one-in-a-million event. <i></i> 25 Feb 2021.

### STICKY WORK

Pham Thi Thanh Ngoc, 32, was arrested after authorities in South Vietnam seized 324,000 used condoms ready for resale. Her job was to clean, dry and sort the contraceptives. *Metro*, 24 Sept 2020.



MARTIN ROSS

## SUPER-CENTENARIANS

The oldest people on the planet



JILL PRESS / NICOLAS TUCAT / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE LEFT: Kane Tanake pictured on her 116th birthday and (below) aged 20 in 1923. ABOVE RIGHT: Sister André: "Be brave."

Kane Tanake turned 118 on 2 January 2021, and is probably the oldest living human whose age is beyond doubt, recognised as such by *Guinness World Records* in March 2019.

She is currently the third oldest verified person, and oldest Japanese verified person ever. Kane Tanake, née Ota, was born in the village of Wajiro on the southern island of Kyushu in 1903. She has twice survived cancer and has lived through two pandemics – Spanish flu in 1918, and Covid-19. She married her cousin Hideo Tanake when she was 19, bore him four children, and worked in the family store selling shiruko and udon noodles until she was 103. She has five grandchildren and eight great grandchildren. Her husband died in 1993 aged 90. She lives in a nursing home in Kukuoka in south-western Japan, where she usually wakes at 6am and enjoys playing the strategic board game Othello, doing calculations and practising calligraphy. She loves Coca-Cola and chocolate.

This year's Olympics in Japan will be the 49th in her lifetime. She is hoping to carry the Olympic torch as it passes through Shime in her home prefecture. While her family will push her in a wheelchair for most of her leg, she is

determined to walk the final few steps as she passes the torch to the next runner.

For the first time last year, Japan recorded more than 80,000 centenarians – one in every 1,565 people, more than 88 per cent women. Japanese women have a life expectancy of 87.45 years compared to 81.4 for men. *D.Telegraph*, 22 Sept 2020; *[CNN]* 4 Mar; *Eve. Standard*, 5 Mar 2021.

• The world's second oldest person whose age is beyond doubt – and Europe's oldest super-centenarian – is Sister André, who turned 117 on 11 February 2021. She lives in the Saint Catherine Labouré nursing home in Toulon, south-eastern France, which was hit by Covid-19 in January, just as nurses began consulting residents about vaccinations; 81 of its 88 residents became infected, including Sister André, and 11 died. She remained isolated for weeks and felt a bit *patraque* (off colour). She slept more than usual, but she prayed and remained asymptomatic. She has now become the oldest known person to have survived the pandemic.

Sister André was born Lucile Randon in 1904 in Ales into a Protestant family – the only girl among three brothers. She

converted to Catholicism and was baptised at the age of 26. She took her ecclesiastical title in 1944 when she joined the Daughters of Charity, an order of nuns. She was then assigned to a hospital in Vichy, where she worked for 31 years and then spent 30 years in a retirement home in the French Alps before moving to Toulon. She is now blind and in a wheelchair.

Her 117th birthday feast started with port, foie gras and hot figs; then roasted capon with porcini mushrooms and sweet potatoes, followed by Roquefort and goat's cheese, with red wine. Finally, her favourite desert: a raspberry and peach flavoured baked Alaska, with a glass of champagne. Asked what she would say to young people, Sister André said: "Be brave and show compassion". *[AFP]* 11 Feb; *NY Times*, international edition, 12 Feb 2021.

• Britain's oldest person, Joan Hocquard, died last October aged 112 at her home in Poole, Dorset. She was born on 29 March 1908 and spent much of her childhood in Kenya. She drove ambulances in London during World War II. She met her husband Gilbert through their shared love of sailing, and they lived on the south coast of England until his death in 1981. In 2008 she declined the Queen's centenarian telegram, because she didn't want people to know her age. *D.Mail*, 26 Oct 2020.



## SKY SHIPS

A photograph taken by David Morris (below left) appears to depict a large floating ship off the Cornish coast. Mr Morris, who took the photo near Gillan, looking out across the Helford River, said he was left "amazed and very baffled", although he had seen the phenomenon before.

This turned out to be only one in a viral gallery of 'levitating boats' photographed around the UK in late February and early March. Colin McCallum was startled to see a large red ship in the sky as he travelled through Banff, Aberdeenshire, on 26 February (below right), while Ian Lawrence snapped a cruise liner, the *Jewel of the Seas*, seemingly floating just off Bournemouth on 16 March (right).

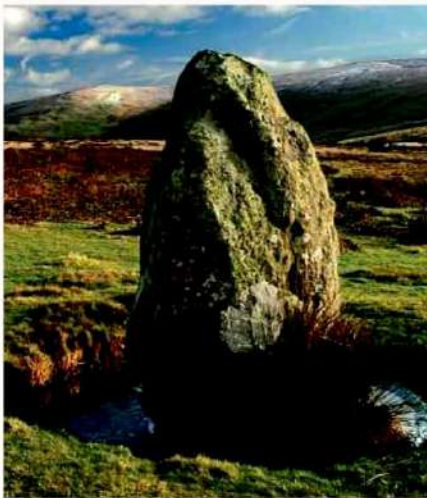
An optical illusion of this sort is sometimes known as a Fata Morgana (after Morgan le Fay, the sorceress of Arthurian legend) and is an example of a superior mirage – a product, as BBC meteorologist David Braine explained, of "the weather condition known as a temperature inversion, where cold air lies close to the sea with warmer air above it. Since cold air is denser than warm air, it bends light towards the eyes of someone standing on the ground or on the coast, changing how a distant object appears. Superior mirages can produce a few different types of images – here a distant ship appears to float high above its actual position, but sometimes an object below the horizon can become visible." *Daily Record*, 2 Mar; *ITV News*, 4 Mar; *BBC News*, 4+18 Mar 2021.





PAUL DEVEREUX digs up the latest discoveries from Stonehenge and India's 'Lake of Skeletons'

THE PHOTOLIBRARY WALES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



ATISH WAGHWASE / SCHWIM / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE LEFT: A standing stone at Waun Mawn in the Preseli Mountains of south-west Wales. ABOVE RIGHT: The mysterious 'Lake of Skeletons' in the Indian Himalayas.

## STONEHENGE BEFORE STONEHENGE

Mention of 'Stonehenge' is catnip to the media, and they duly made a splash earlier this year about publication of the results of the 'Stones of Stonehenge' project conducted by Mike Parker Pearson (UCL) and colleagues. They had worked for some time to identify the origins of the Stonehenge bluestones (the smaller stones, not the later, larger, local sarsens).

Some of the bluestones, at least, certainly came from quarry points in and around the Carn Menyn ridge in the Preseli hills, south-west Wales, but there is a nagging rumour that the stones were first erected locally before being transported to their final destination on Salisbury Plain, 175 miles (282km) distant. This rumour was seemingly started by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. AD 1136). He claimed that they originally formed a monument in Ireland called the Giants' Dance. Although none of the stones came from Ireland, in Geoffrey's day far west Wales was considered Irish territory. Could there be an archaic relic of memory in the story?

The petrologically confirmed fact that the bluestones came from the Preseli area, and the numerous prehistoric monuments there indicating that it was a venerated landscape in Neolithic times, could allow for the possibility of the stones having originally been used for a monument there. This has been pondered by various modern researchers. Over the last decade, Parker Pearson et. al. have identified quarry spots in Preseli and excavated and dated two of them to 3400-3000 BC. In looking for a likely original Preseli site for the stones of a similar date, they finally alighted on the

now unimpressive Waun Mawn site (about 4 miles/6.5km WNW from the Carn Menyn ridge), consisting of three fallen and one standing stone. Detailed excavation revealed six stone holes (one of which could have accommodated the size and specific shape of bluestone 62 at Stonehenge) which, along with the surviving stones, allowed the researchers to calculate that the original monument would have been 110m (360ft) in diameter, the same diameter as the circular ditch that encloses Stonehenge. Waun Mawn's layout also indicates that it would have aligned on the Midsummer Solstice sunrise, like Stonehenge. The researchers state in their paper in *Antiquity*: "Our previous excavations at Stonehenge have provided evidence that the bluestones were first set up in the Aubrey Holes (the ring of pits that surround the stone circle) during the monument's first construction stage... Thus, a hypothetical original, dismantled stone circle in Wales would date to this period or earlier".

The researchers therefore suggest that the bluestones could have been "markers of ancestral identity" that were eventually relocated to the site we call Stonehenge. Further, we know that isotopic analysis of 25 of the 60 cremations at Stonehenge identified four that had lived in the Preseli area, and so possibly more in the remaining unanalysed ones. The research is too extensive and detailed to fully encapsulate here in a column, but the evidence overall suggests that these people brought their stony, symbolic ancestors with them to Salisbury Plain. Why there and for what reason? Well, that is another story. *Original paper: Antiquity, vol.95, no.379, 12 Feb 2021.*

## LAKE OF MYSTERY BONES

Roopkund Lake (aka 'Lake of Skeletons'), high in the Indian Himalayas, is the scene of one of archaeology's most bizarre mysteries. It is frozen much of the year, but when the ice melts the skeletal remains of several hundred people are revealed. Previous studies of a large selection of the skeletons have found that the people tended to have been of "more than average stature". Most were middle-aged adults, though some were elderly women. There were no children. All were of reasonably good health. They were first discovered in 1942, and people have been trying to figure out an answer to the puzzle ever since. Were they a king and his followers killed in a blizzard centuries ago? Indian soldiers intent on invading Tibet in 1841 who lost their way? The victims of an epidemic? Travellers or pilgrims caught out by the weather, possibly killed by giant hailstones (**FT192:93**)? Or what? Now, a recent study has deepened the mystery.

The extensive and international study carbon-dated and genetically analysed the remains of 38 individuals, men and women. It seems the dead were both genetically diverse and their deaths were separated in time by as much as 1,000 years (the oldest remains were about 1,200 years old). Some of them were genetically similar to present-day people who live in South Asia (though not from the same population), with others closely related to people living in present-day Europe, particularly those living in the Greek island of Crete, apparently.

"It upends any explanations that involved a single catastrophic event that led to their deaths," said Eadaoin Harey (Harvard), lead author of the study. So, go figure. *BBC News, 28 Feb 2021.*





# CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

## 258: MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU

"Towns in ruins – terrible bloodshed – bombs and burnings – shocking series of murders – hellish vandalism – brutality and terrorism – hangings, ambushes, raids" – Fort, *Books*, p585

Brutal/corrupt police, mercenary soldiers' atrocities, peasant revolts, terrorism religious and secular – you name it, we live through it. So did the Greeks and Romans.

Long before the Bow Street Runners and Robert Peel, fifth-century BC Athens had a regular police force. Remarkable (to us: Greeks and Romans were in constant fear of armed slave revolts) is that it was composed of 300 foreign Scythian slaves: how did Athenian citizens respond to being pushed around by suchlike? Their functions and methods are detailed mainly by Aristophanes and late ancient scholars, hence not always sure how to take it: conspectus of references in Elizabeth Baughman's online article (2003). Along with whips, they were armed with bows, significantly in that this was the weapon anciently most despised, it being thought cowardly to kill at a distance.

Inconvenient for hand-to-hand, useful for crowd control. Handy for them that Athens had banned civilians from carrying knives within city limits – no National Sword Association or Second Amendment, albeit Thucydides's praise (bk1 ch6) of this measure is offset by the ridicule heaped upon it by Anacharsis in Lucian's eponymous *Dialogue* (chs33-5).

Various scenes in Aristophanes describe them as policing the often tumultuous People's Assembly, dragging an unruly individual from the council chamber, 'kettling' and ousting drunks from the city centre, whipping and cuffing alike men and women, young and old – their brutal treatment of one elderly victim evoked tears from onlookers – all sounds very familiar.

We've had Forsyth's *Dogs of War* in fiction, 'Mad' Mike Hoare and company in fact. One hired sword was the earliest Greek lyric poet, Archilochus – his name suitably means 'Leader of the Pack', prefiguring the Shangri-las' hit ditty of that title. Archilochus was notorious for his virulently abusive poems against individuals, supposedly driving a father and daughter to suicide. Worse, a papyrus found and published in 1974 (now at Cologne) shows him boasting about raping a young girl.

Essayist-Historian Xenophon led his mercenaries to fight in a Persian civil war.

Ending up on the losing side, his *Anabasis* (Up-Country: inspiration for the 1979 film *The Warriors*), describes their struggle to get home, including a lively description (bk4 chs26-7) of sipping Armenian beer from a communal bowl, using straws to avoid dubious floating objects.

Apart from Archilochus's rape, another atrocity was the butchery wrought upon the village of Mykalessos, including the slaughter of all the children at their desks in school by a band of Thracians infuriated at being sent home unpaid by the Athenians (Thucydides, bk7 ch29).

Ignatius (*Letter 5*) describes the soldiers escorting him to Rome and martyrdom as "ten leopards from a military detachment" – apparently the first occurrence of this animal in Greek and Roman texts.



Probably a figurative term for the so-called *Diognitae*, variously thought of as tough enforcers or vigilantes or task-forces sent on specific missions or locally based soldiers who might be drafted as emergency required, along with armed slaves or gladiators – Liddell & Scott's *Greek Lexicon*

mildly dubs them "mounted policemen", which sounds too Canadian: in Christian texts, they always feature in martyrologies; cf. my full account, *Illinois Classical Studies* 10 (1985), 281-3, also CP Jones in the same journal (12, 1987, 179) and DB Saddington, *Journal of Theological Studies* 38, 1987, 411-2.

Roman emperors were protected by both the Praetorian Guards and German auxiliaries. Why these distinct groups? The Praetorians' camp was situated a strikingly long way from the palace – inconvenient for emergencies: a sign of mistrust? When the Praetorians assassinated Caligula (AD 37), they were in turn cut down by the Germans rushing in too late. Before Caligula, praetorian prefect Macro had strangled Tiberius. After him, they dragged Claudius from behind a curtain and made him emperor. In the chaos of AD 193, they auctioned off the throne to the mega-rich Didius Julianus, a Trump-like business deal and an unwise one – he was assassinated two months later. We, of course, have witnessed the murders of Indira Gandhi and Anwar Sadat by their own bodyguards.

The Praetorians were cashiered by Constantine I, their Byzantine successors being the *Excubitores* ('Those Out Of Bed', a romantically curious title, perhaps indicative of being awoken in a crisis), later still by the Scandinavian Varangians,

notable for their ruby earrings and decorative dragon badges – did they use Norse Code?

Roman secret policemen originated with the *Frumentarii*, officials who went about the provinces collecting wheat. They reckoned that this job had given them ready-made expertise in local peoples and places, and emperor Hadrian (AD 117-38) perverted them into his personal spy network, dispersed with techniques Stalin might have envied, ferreting out and reporting personal secrets, even gaining access (à la Orwellian Thought Police) to domestic correspondence – classic example in the *Augustan History*'s biography of Hadrian (ch11 para3).

007's trade title 'Agent' derives from the sinisterly vague *Agentes in Rebus*; a loose comparison might be Idi Amin's 'State Research Bureau'. Probably created by Emperor Diocletian (AD 284-305), they replaced the *Frumentarii* in name but not in activities, reaching their apogee under Justinian (AD 527-565; cf. Procopius, *Secret History*, ch30), apparently vanishing in the eighth century.

Roman slave rebellions ended with Spartacus: the cinematic prophecy "He Will Come Back in Millions" did not materialise. The mass roadside crucifixion of 600 survivors was an unforgettable deterrent. In their place came frequent peasant uprisings around the Empire. Of these, two may exemplify. The Bagaudæ, mainly active in France and Spain, were a centuries-long thorn in the imperial flesh. Some, without evidence, see them as a Christian-inspired movement. They are best studied in the various articles written by Edward Thompson (my old prof). Certainly Christian were the *Circumcelliones* (a term denoting their roaming the countryside), albeit not orthodox but an extremist faction of the heretic Donatists, a North African sect, active in the fourth-fifth centuries; cf. my detailed account in *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 6 (1962), 1-11, based largely on the evidences of Augustine. Some of their social policies (condemning property-owners, cancelling debts, freeing slaves, free love) had considerable appeal. Less so their habit of beating people with special clubs known as 'Israelites' (nothing to do with Desmond Dekker) whilst chanting *Laudate Deum* – their equivalent of *Allahu Akbar*, though never sinking to the barbarous (they were more Berberous) depravities of Daesh.

"There may be something of the nature of an occult police force... often solving one problem, only by making another" – Fort, *Books*, p666 (a suggestive number).



## SPECIAL REPORT

# SUNIL AND THE RAINING STONES

PAUL CROPPER reports on a stone-throwing poltergeist in Bhutan



Bhutan is a unique country, a scenic Himalayan kingdom shrouded in myth, mystery and magic. Called by its people *Druk yul* – “the Land of the Thunder Dragon” – it is a place where traditional cultural beliefs and folklore are woven into everyday life. In December 2019, Bhutan was also home to a rather aggressive stone-throwing poltergeist.

The original report came from *Kuensel Online* journalist, Rajesh Rai. *Kuensel* is the national newspaper of the Kingdom of Bhutan and features regional news reports in English. Rajesh’s article described how a stone-throwing ghost had returned to terrorise the Ghalley family from Sombek village in Sangachholing, Samtse. The Samtse district is in remote south-western Bhutan, very close to the Indian border and, as a result, politically it’s quite a sensitive area.

The paranormal pelting had commenced on the night of 19 November when Sunil Ghalley, 15, and his grandfather Bhagilal



TOP: The Ghalley family house in Sombek, Bhutan. ABOVE: Stones on the roof of the Ghalley house.

Ghalley, 76, were sleeping in a remote cattle hut. Around 7pm, stones started to hit their roof. Startled, they made their way to a nearby relative’s hut, but the pelting continued. Now genuinely scared, they went to a nearby village for the night.

The next day Sunil’s father, Sabir Ghalley, arrived at their grazing land and was shocked

when the stones began to fall again around 3.30pm. Sabir and Sunil then moved again to a relative’s hut, only to be hit with even larger stones.

“Something was chasing us. It followed us all the way,” Sabir said.

The next day, 21 November, the stone pelting began at 7am. Even weirder, household pots

and pans were thrown out into the open.

Local villagers observed that incidents seemed to happen only when young Sunil was around. Sunil had recently dropped out of school after his family had claimed he had “special powers” and that he had occasionally fallen into a trance-like state.

In one startling incident, Sunil and his uncle were returning home from a market in a vehicle with several other people and all the windows closed when stones began to hit young Sunil inside the car. It seems clear that whatever was happening, the 15-year-old boy was at the centre of it.

Bhutan is a deeply religious country, with religion embedded in almost all aspects of life, and while Buddhism is the dominant religion, shamanism is still a strong force in many rural and regional areas. While practices vary, the shaman’s role is typically to act as medium between the people and what they believe to be aggrieved spirits, and to work out how these angry ghosts can be appeased. Well, that’s the plan, anyway.

When the first shaman appeared in Sombek he was immediately struck by a flying stone. Feeling the situation demanded more spiritual firepower, he departed to consult with his master and gather reinforcements. Soon after, 10 monks and a lam (a senior monk) arrived at the village to conduct rituals. At one time, there were more than 40 people in the Ghalley home, but to everyone’s astonishment, stones kept raining on the roof. Village coordinator Khadka Singh Ghalley confirmed that stones had fallen during the monks’ ceremony. “I am yet to understand what it is,” he confessed.

Sher Bahadur Ghalley, a shaman based in nearby Sipsu, spoke to the family and was sent one of the stones. “This stone sparked and became like a magnet when I put it on a bronze plate for a ritual,” he told Rajesh. “Then I knew there was something wrong, and decided to go to Sombek.”





The startled shaman felt sure he had an explanation for the puzzling pelting: it was all because of Sabir's great grandfather. "He was a great shaman but had renounced shamanism to become a sadhu," he said. A sadhu is a religious ascetic who has renounced a worldly life and dedicated him or herself to seeking enlightenment. According to Sher Bahadur Ghalley, Sabir's grandfather had not been able to become an accomplished sadhu. When he died, his family had not conducted the correct death rites and that was why he was haunting them.

The stones had continued to fall from 19 to 29 November. On 3 December, another shaman visited the family's house to conduct rituals and the incidents ceased. Journalist Rajesh Rai also arrived in Sombek on the same day. While he didn't observe any stones falling, everyone he spoke to in the village was convinced the case was genuine. He met young Sunil, whom he found to be a quiet young lad, small for his age with something of a "different aura" about him.

"I met everyone in the family and they had the same story" he told me. "I met some religious



[people], local leaders, and their relatives, their neighbours, and they all had the same thing to say... they saw stones coming out of nowhere, you know, from the ground at times... and [they] struck on the roof."

The lull proved temporary. On 4 December, Sabir's grandmother Man Kumari Ghalley was hit on the side of the head by a stone.

In mid-December, fired up after speaking with the enthusiastic and helpful Rajesh, I started making plans to get to Bhutan. From Sydney, it's around 12 hours flying time, through Bangkok then on to Paro in Bhutan. Getting to Sombek

from the capital is the tricky bit – around nine hours' driving on largely dirt roads with the last two or three hours requiring a four wheel drive.

Travel time aside, visiting Bhutan is not a simple exercise. Access is strictly controlled and all bookings must be made via a Bhutanese tour operator or their partner. Tourists must pay \$250 per day, in advance, for their package and must be accompanied by a registered local guide.

In addition, some parts of the country are simply off limits – Sombek included, as I was eventually to find out.



ABOVE: Journalist Rajesh Rai at Sombek village. LEFT: Sunil's grandmother, Man Kumari Ghalley, shows one of the stones. Sunil sits behind her. BELOW LEFT: Sombek villagers remove a stone from the roof of the house.

The government authorities I contacted were polite but very firm: it simply was not possible to visit that district as a tourist. After about a week of emailing, I surrendered to the inevitable. I wasn't going to get permission and the case was going to have to run its course without me.

It appears the stone-throwing at Sombek continued into 2020. When I emailed Rajesh in April last year, he said he had been told by the head of the village that the stoning had finally ceased after another shaman, Sher Bdr Ghalley, was brought in to complete a key ritual. There was no further activity after his visit.

A year later, and I still have mixed feelings about the case. I completely understand and respect the Bhutanese desire to protect their unique culture, but I do regret losing the opportunity to investigate an active stone-throwing poltergeist case. In a global sense, they are not that rare, so post-Covid there's a good chance another active case will turn up in Africa, India or south-east Asia that I can get to.

Perhaps one day I'll also get the chance to visit Bhutan and meet Sunil Ghalley. I imagine he would have an interesting story to tell.





# Cloudbusting

DAVID HAMBLING looks at attempts, both great and small, to influence the planet's weather

"Everybody complains about the weather, but nobody does anything about it," commented American novelist Charles Warner, a remark quoted by and often ascribed to Mark Twain. Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this was not quite true, and now everyone from backyard tinkerers to billionaire technologists aspires to meteorological influence. It's a field filled with eccentrics, but there is science behind the megalomania.

We start with a series of mysterious booms that shook the small town of Hammonton, New Jersey, in December. These were traced to the property of construction worker Rob Butkowski, who had built a device to fire shockwaves into the sky with the aim of breaking up clouds. "You can see the clouds split apart," Butkowski told his local newspaper. "You can hear it rip."

The device, based on plans downloaded from the Internet, mixes acetylene and oxygen and detonates them in an ear-splitting explosion, which a 5m (16ft) horn directs upwards. Left idle by the pandemic slowdown, Butkowski had wanted to protect his vines from hail damage and built his backyard cloudbuster – a type not to be confused with the altogether more bizarre cloudbuster powered by psychic orgone energy developed by Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (see **FT107:26-30**).

While rare in America, such devices, known as hail cannon, are still common in European vineyards. The concept was pioneered by an Austrian wine grower, Albert Stigler, in 1896. Soon everyone was copying the idea, with some 10,000 in 1900 according to one survey. The problem is that the weather is notoriously inconsistent, and it is often impossible to tell whether interventions have any actual influence. The Italian government carried out scientific tests on hail cannon, and by 1909 had concluded they had no effect. As with many discredited practices, though, people still cling to them.

In April last year the *Times* reported that wine producers in Bordeaux were angry when, despite barrages from batteries of hail cannon, clouds had dumped "hailstones the size of pigeon eggs" in the worst storms in years, causing extensive damage. The correlation between artillery fire and rainfall was well documented when the hail cannon was invented, but meteorologists already suspected it was not the sound, but smoke particles from gunfire that



LEFT: A modern hail cannon in a vineyard in Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

had an effect. Rain and hail form around atmospheric particles, and introducing a mass of particles at the right time can trigger precipitation. This led to decades of rainmaking experiments, chiefly involving silver iodide dropped from aircraft (see **FT385:14**).

Again, the results have been frustratingly inconsistent: you cannot tell whether it would have rained anyway. There are also legal issues. Cloud seeding effectively steals rain from one area to give it to another. One US military experiment, Project Cirrus, seeded storm clouds that went on to cause significant damage in Savannah, Georgia – which brought threats of lawsuits.

Cloud seeding fell out of fashion because of the lack of reliable results. The UAE and China still have large-scale experimental programmes. In the case of the UAE, cloud seeding is a long shot that might ease chronic water shortage. And in China, one expert told me that the rainmaking effort fitted in with grandiose government plans to at least appear to be in control of everything, and wanted to take credit even for the weather. It would be a mistake to underestimate Chinese work in this field. Their cloud-seeding operation involves some 35,000 people, at least 12 aircraft and 900 rocket launchers. The Tianhe ('sky river') project aims to divert rainfall from the Yangtze River basin to the Yellow River basin, with hundreds of silver iodide burners built into mountainsides. And there is a steady stream of scientific papers and new experiments, including a purpose-built cloud-seeding drone called Ganlin, ('sweet rain') fitted with sensors to locate the optimum spot to release its payloads and record the results.

Even grander schemes are under way to counter climate change. High altitude

clouds reflect solar radiation and reduce temperature; geoengineering seeks to do this on a global scale and alter the climate. Harvard University researchers are carrying out one such experiment, known as Stratospheric Controlled Perturbation Experiment or SCoPEX, with financial backing from supporters including Bill Gates. This will send a huge balloon to more than 20km (66,000ft) with scientific instruments and a payload of powdered calcium carbonate – effectively, chalk dust. The dust will

be released to form a cloud about 1km (0.6 miles) long and 100m (328ft) across, and the balloon will monitor how long this artificial cloud lasts and how effectively it reflects sunlight.

Scaling SCoPEX up to the required level would be a massive undertaking. A 2012 Royal Society paper suggested that 10 million tons of material would need to be lofted per annum. That's a lot of balloons. And the actual science is not clear-cut, especially when dealing with complex global weather systems.

Like other forms of weather modification, geoengineering may have unexpected consequences. It could alter rainfall patterns and bring drought or flooding in some areas, and dimming sunlight may affect crop growth. Mainly though, there is the question of who would control the effort and have the power to turn it on and off. In the absence of a world government, expect the usual clash of superpower interests. China's ideal global temperature might not be the same as America's. Britain might not even get a vote.

There are of course longstanding conspiracy theories that a covert geoengineering project is already under way using chemtrails, mysteriously persistent contrails. However, according to the meteorologists, contrails that spread out to form cirrus cloud are actually contributing to global warming because they trap heat more effectively than reflecting it.

This type of intervention is highly controversial. Whether it's a matter of China stealing rain from its neighbours, or massive initiatives to shift the climate, it is likely to trigger conflict. If we can ever successfully do something about the weather, which still remains to be seen, the arguments will just be beginning. For more on cloud seeding, see **FT108:10, 137:14, 154:22, 247:8-9**.





# RISE OF THE SUPER-SOLDIERS

Gene editing and exoskeletons could change future conflicts

US ARMY

In 2014, then-President Barack Obama told a press conference: "Basically I'm here to announce that we're building Iron Man." He was quite serious: the US military had begun work on a project to construct a form of exoskeleton known as the Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit (TALOS). A promotional video shown at the press event depicted the wearer attacking a group of enemies, with bullets ricocheting off the armour. However, the project came to an end five years later without completion, although the manufacturers hope that individual components of the suit may have applications elsewhere. Exoskeletons are one example of technological developments being trialled by various militaries with the intention of improving their soldiers' combat abilities. Such endeavours are, of course, nothing new; as far back as the Bronze Age, new technology was being used for military purposes, but whereas in the past such enhancement meant improved armour or weaponry, today the focus is also on enhancing the individual soldier.

In 2017, Vladimir Putin warned of genetic modification that might create "a soldier, a man who can fight without fear, compassion, regret or pain". And in 2020, former US Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe accused China of conducting "human testing on members of the People's Liberation Army in hope of developing soldiers with biologically enhanced capabilities. There are no ethical boundaries to Beijing's pursuit of power," he wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* article.

Although China denied the allegation, describing the article as a "miscellany of lies", a 2019 paper by two US academics stated that China's military was "actively exploring" techniques like gene editing, exoskeletons and human-machine collaboration. Could modification of human anatomy and biology produce soldiers able to withstand pain, extreme cold or the need to sleep?

One of the paper's authors, Elsa



Kania, placed a caveat on John Ratcliffe's comments, pointing out that while the Chinese military might aspire to create 'super-soldiers', such ambitions were restricted by the limitations of what technology was currently capable of achieving: "What is feasible within science does impose a constraint on any actor that is trying to try to push the frontiers." Ratcliffe had been alleging that Chinese scientists were performing tests on adults. While some characteristics could be altered in adults using gene editing, changing the DNA of embryos offered a more plausible route to the development of 'super-soldiers'.

Molecular geneticist Dr Helen O'Neill stated that the question was less about whether such technology was already possible, and more about whether scientists would be prepared to use it. "Genome editing and its combination with assisted reproduction are becoming routine practices in transgenics and agriculture," she explained. "It's just the combination of the two for human use that is seen as unethical at the moment." In 2018, a Chinese scientist announced that he had successfully altered the DNA in the embryos of twin girls to prevent them catching HIV. Such gene-editing is banned in most countries, including China, being restricted to discarded IVF embryos, and only if they are destroyed immediately afterwards. The scientist, He

Jiankui, was convicted and sent to prison, the case being regarded as a key moment in bioethics (FT396:26). As well as protecting the twins from HIV, the treatment also brought cognitive enhancements. He Jiankui had used Crispr gene-editing technology to engineer specific and precise changes to the DNA within living cells. Some characteristics can be removed, and others added. The potential for being able to treat or even cure inherited diseases is huge. However, Christophe Galichet, senior research scientist at London's Francis Crick Institute, warned that modification of a single gene wouldn't simply produce single effects. "If you take a gene," he said, "you could have an individual with greater muscles or being able to breathe at high altitude. But maybe further down the line the individual will develop cancer."

Chinese gene modification experiments are seen by some as a response to US explorations in the same area. A 2017 *Guardian* report claimed that a US military agency was investing tens of millions of dollars on genetic extinction technology with the intention of wiping out invasive species – something UN experts warned could also have military applications. France's armed forces have also been given approval to develop "enhanced soldiers". Defence Minister Florence Parly insisted that this research would be undertaken

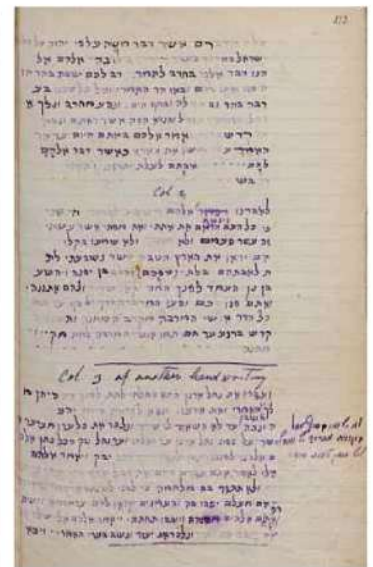
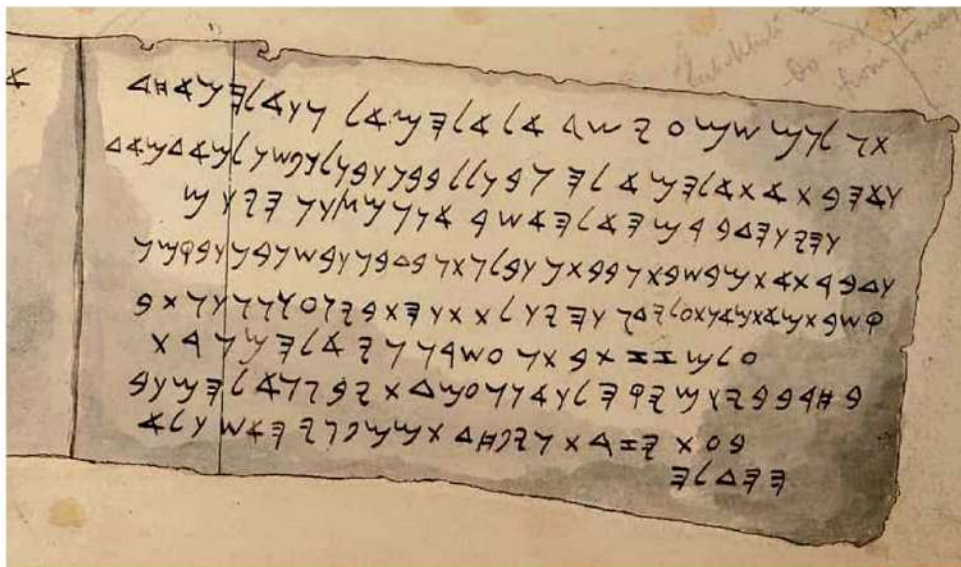
within ethical boundaries, but cautioned that "not everyone shares our scruples and we must be prepared for whatever the future holds." Nevertheless, the risks it is legally permissible to impose on soldiers are greater than those that civilians can be exposed to. Both China and Russia are reported to have tested COVID-19 vaccines on their troops, and whatever the truth of 'Gulf War Syndrome', it's beyond dispute that Allied soldiers in Iraq in 1991 were given a battery of inoculations without their consent. As Prof Julian Savulescu, an Oxford University specialist in ethics, says: "The military doesn't exist to promote the interests of the soldier; it exists to gain a strategic advantage or win a war," adding that it was "difficult to exercise any ethical control or democratic control over how things evolve in the military because, by nature, it involves secrecy and privacy to protect the national interest."

One of the ethical dilemmas surrounding this research is that the potential benefits have a dual application. For example, exoskeleton research was first aimed at helping or curing people of medical conditions such as paralysis, enabling them to walk again by means of a mind-controlled exoskeleton, but of course this therapeutic use can easily be weaponised. Dr O'Neill argues that China has already forged ahead in genetic research, while other countries have, as she puts it, "wasted time in ethical arguments, rather than focusing on the reality of the here and the now." According to her, such countries have placed themselves at a disadvantage, spending "far too much energy... on speculation and dystopia." Instead, she suggests, "much more energy should be spent on real risks and applying the technology so that we understand it better, because it will be done elsewhere and is being done elsewhere. And it's only through continued research that we will understand where it may go wrong." *BBC News*, 7 Feb 2021.





## SCROLL UP! SCROLL UP! | A notorious forgery vindicated at last? Plus, fresh fragments from Israel's 'Cave of Horror'



ABOVE LEFT: A British Museum drawing of one of the Shapira strips. ABOVE RIGHT: The first page of Shapira's draft transcription. BELOW: Moses Wilhelm Shapira.

### THE SHAPIRA SCRIPTS

In 1883, Jerusalem antiquities collector and dealer Moses Wilhelm Shapira announced to the world that 15 leather strips bearing an ancient text had been discovered somewhere in a cave near the Dead Sea, which, he claimed, contained fragments of the Book of Deuteronomy. Shapira was born to Polish-Jewish parents in Russian-annexed Poland in 1830. He later converted to Christianity and applied for German citizenship, opening a shop in Jerusalem and becoming a pre-eminent antiquities dealer, selling some genuine and some faked pieces to European collectors and national museums.

The palæo-Hebrew script on the leather manuscripts was nearly illegible as they had been blackened with a pitch-like substance, but Shapira claimed they constituted the 'original' book of Deuteronomy – and even suggested that it might have been the copy owned by Moses. He sold the 15 pieces to the British Museum for the then-enormous sum of £1 million; two of them went on display and attracted large numbers of visitors, including Prime Minister William



*Shapira claimed it might have been the copy owned by Moses*

Gladstone. But French archaeologist Charles Clermont-Ganneau, a long-time nemesis of Shapira's, was briefly permitted to examine several of the fragments. He promptly declared them to be forgeries, the British Museum's expert agreed, and a distraught Shapira fled London, committing suicide six months later in a Netherlands hotel room. Two years later, the museum sold the fragments for just £25 to a private collector.

However, Shapira may have been vindicated at last. A new study (and accompanying book) by Israeli-American scholar Idan Dershowitz, of Germany's University of Potsdam, has analysed archival, linguistic and literary evidence and concludes that the pieces were a genuinely ancient artefact. Dershowitz reconstructed the text from the original 19th century transcriptions and drawings, and claims the text dates back to around 957 BC. This was the time of the First Temple, built during King Solomon's reign, and pre-dates the Babylonian Exile, which would make the Shapira scripts the oldest known biblical artefacts ever discovered.

The text follows Deuteronomy, but with a few differences; there are no laws apart from the Ten Commandments and more of a historical narrative with Moses talking to the Israelites. University of Texas linguist Dr Na'ama Pat-El has studied the text and is working on a lexicon and syntax with Dershowitz. She said it is pretty standard biblical Hebrew, similar to the seventh or sixth century texts, with some features similar to those seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Shimon Gesundheit of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem has also examined the text, and said the Shapira version reads "smoother" and looks more original than the Book of Deuteronomy itself, adding that the laws in Deuteronomy "interrupt the narrative flow between the beginning and the end". The Ten Commandments in the Shapira version differ, as they are declared in the first person – as if from God – rather than the third person. He also pointed out that because the Shapira text doesn't contain the divine laws, then it would, if genuine, probably be older than Deuteronomy, since it's "hard to believe somebody would delete them."





Although the current location of the manuscript is unknown, Dershowitz is hopeful that some fragments may have survived and could one day resurface, allowing scholars to read a true biblical fragment. He believes the dismissal of the manuscripts as a fake 140 years ago was a tragedy for both Shapira and for the “entire existence of the discipline of Bible studies”. In a New York Times interview, he described travelling the world investigating the validity of the scroll, including reading through Shapira’s manuscripts in Berlin, where he discovered handwritten sheets that showed how the collector had attempted to decipher the fragments. “If he forged them, or was part of a conspiracy, it makes no sense that he’d be sitting there trying to guess what the text is, and making mistakes while he did it.”

Dershowitz added: “It’s mind-boggling that for almost the entire existence of the discipline of Bible studies this text hasn’t been part of the conversation.” Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls after WWII, which date to about the second century BC, the earliest bible manuscript was from the 10th century AD. *New York Times*, *D. Mail*, 10 Mar 2021. ‘The Valediction of Moses: New Evidence on the Shapira

*Deuteronomy Fragments*’ by Idan Dershowitz, in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 133(1): 1–22 (2021).

## CAVE OF HORROR

New texts believed to be related to the Dead Sea Scrolls have been unearthed by Israeli archaeologists in the so-called ‘Cave of Horror’ at Nahal Hever in the occupied West Bank. More than 20 fragments of 2,000-year-old biblical texts have been discovered. They are believed to have been hidden during the Bar Kochba revolt, an armed Jewish uprising against Rome during the reign of Emperor Hadrian between AD 132 and 136. The fragments bear Greek transla-

tions from the Old Testament Books of Zechariah and Nahum, with only the name of God written in Hebrew. The pieces have been carbon dated to the 2nd century AD. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in desert caves in the West Bank near Qumran, not far from Nahal Hever. The Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) has been trying to salvage artefacts from the Judæan Desert since 2017 because of looting that began when the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered by Bedouin shepherds in the 1940s.

“The desert team showed exceptional courage, dedication and devotion to purpose, rappelling down to caves located between Heaven and Earth, digging

and sifting through them, enduring thick and suffocating dust, and returning with gifts of immeasurable worth for mankind,” said Israel Hasson, the IAA’s director. The ‘Cave of Horror’ is “flanked by gorges and can only be reached by rappelling precariously down the sheer cliff.” The cave’s name is derived from the 40 human skeletons found there during excavations in the 1960s. Alongside the manuscript fragments, the archaeologists also found the 6,000-year-old skeleton of a child mummified in a piece of cloth and a large woven basket, dated to 9,500 BC. Experts believe it could be the oldest complete basket in the world. A CT scan conducted on the skeleton by the Tel Aviv University School of Medicine established the child to have been between six and 12 years old when it died. “Due to the arid conditions in the cave, the child was naturally mummified. The cloth and other organic materials, including hair and even skin and tendons, were likewise preserved,” an IAA spokesperson said. *D. Telegraph*, 16 Mar 2021.

‘The Valediction of Moses: New Evidence on the Shapira Deuteronomy Fragments’ by Idan Dershowitz, in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 133(1): 1–22 (2021).



ABOVE LEFT: Biblical scroll fragments from the Bar Kochba period. ABOVE RIGHT: Archeologists at work in the Cave of Horror. TOP: What may be the world’s oldest basket.





## STRANGE CONTINENT | ULRICH MAGIN rounds up the weirdest news from Europe, including a snow circle and some blue dogs



ABOVE: The 'snow circle' made entirely of footprints at Espoo, Finland. The artwork measures 160m (525ft) in diameter and was created by a team of 13 volunteers.

### STRANGE SKIES

Once again, the sky over Europe was full of strange sounds, while sand rained down and aeroplane parts fell from above. In November 2020, a mysterious hum was reported from Bad Honnef, Germany, near the former capital of Bonn. While several neighbours complained, others were unable to hear anything. Similar humming sounds had previously been heard in nearby Hennef in 2005, but telecom equipment found no external source for the annoying noises. This is fairly typical of similar hum phenomena worldwide – they appear more personal than environmental, like a sort of tinnitus. *WDR, 2 Nov 2020.*

The sounds that haunted northern Italy were different. In Bedizzole, 5km (3 miles) southeast of Lake Garda, people repeatedly heard “loud roars” coming from above in January 2021. It was the second such occurrence, the

first having happened in 2016. There were many suggestions as to the origin of the sounds, including the nearby speed train construction site, the steelworks at Lonato or a detonating meteorite, but not a single one was confirmed. Slightly further west, at 6.41pm on 16 February, a magnitude 2.3 earthquake with the epicentre 2km (1.2 miles) south of Viadanica, hit the whole province of Bergamo. People distinctly heard “a loud roar and felt the movement of the ground”. Luckily, there were no reports of damage or injuries. Were the previous sky noises an omen for the later quake? *Giornale di Brescia, 1+16 Feb 2021.*

Falls, too, were reported all over Europe. On 5 January, seismographic data indicated that a meteorite had landed near Løten, Norway, some 120km (74 miles) north of Oslo. Many people in the region heard a loud report and observed a brilliant light

in the sky. Strangely enough, Anne Lycke, director of the Norsar seismographic station, discouraged anyone from searching for the cosmic visitor. “It would be fun to find it, but you’d need a lot of luck to come across it in the forest.” The meteorite hit Norway close to where a large landslide destroyed part of the village of Ask on 30 December 2020. *web.de, 11 Jan 2021.*

For almost the whole of February, Saharan sand rained down on parts of central and southern Europe. At the end of the month, I was privileged to observe a magnificent sunset in which the Sun looked like a gigantic glass ball hovering just a few feet above the horizon. TV news later said this had been due to atmospheric haze caused by the masses of sand. The first accounts I read were from early February, when the sky in southern Germany was said to be yellow and brown. Similar skies were also reported from north-western Spain and

the Côte d’Azur in France. It was almost dark in Lyon. In Alicante and Valencia, Spain, many people ran to the streets to photograph the heavens. A spokesman from the German Meteorological Service told the press he had received calls asking whether the world was about to end. In Andorra, the ski-slopes turned bright yellow. *Badische Neueste Nachrichten, 6 Feb; yahoo.de, 8 Feb 2021.*

Then, in February, in Maastricht in the Netherlands, part of a Boeing airplane became loose, crashing down and injuring two people, an elderly woman who had to be hospitalised after being hit by plane parts, and a child who received slight burns. One of the four engines of the plane had caught fire, but the craft managed to land at Liege airport in Belgium. This was the very same day that parts of a jet engine of a United Airlines Boeing 777 fell on Denver, Colorado. *achener Zeitung, 21 Feb 2021.*





## WINTER WONDERS

Slightly outside Europe, an ice volcano appeared near the village of Kegen in Kazakhstan in February and became a tourist attraction. The chimney-like ice structure formed around a hot well that ejected water into the sky where it immediately froze, slowly building the cone, which finally reached 45ft (14m).

Not to be outdone by nature's creativity, on 6 and 7 February, 13 Finns created a snow circle with a diameter of 160m (525ft) at the Löfkulla golf course in Espoo. The mastermind behind this crop-circle-like artwork was Janne Pyykkö, an IT consultant from Espoo. He attempted to show "how a large team succeeds in demanding work". The snow image consists of six large sub-drawings and a star-shaped centre connecting them. The lines are made of footprints, and the artwork's complexity easily reached that of the most elaborate crop circles. It took 13 people nine hours to complete the design, but – as Pyykkö explained – they were in no hurry. *web.de*, 10 Feb; *Italehti*, 9 Feb 2021.

## DOUBTFUL DOGS

The golden jackal (*Canis aureus*), a wolf-like canid native to southeast Europe, walked in front of the lens of a wildlife camera near Restatt in Germany. The animal is not native to central Europe, but the numbers of sightings have increased recently, and zoologists suggest the animal is expanding its range. The last report in Baden-Württemberg was in December 2020, when a male jackal was killed by a car near Bruchsal. *n-tv.de*, 28 January 2021.

Meanwhile, blue dogs became Internet stars in January when they were photographed near a derelict glass factory in Dzerzhinsk, 370km (230 miles) east of Moscow. A vet took fur samples and found chemical dyes present. Then, green dogs



were spotted at Podolsk, 40km (24 miles) south of Moscow. Their unusual hair colour was supposedly caused by powdered green paint stored in a nearby warehouse. *n-tv.de*, 28 Jan; *BBC News*, 20 Feb 2021.

## STRANGE CATS

Alien Big Cats continue to be a common phenomenon. In July 2020, a large cat – 80-90cm (31-35in) long, 40cm (16in) tall and thought to weigh 6-7kg (13-15lb) – was observed and photographed in the Pineta di Appiano-Tradate Park, 10km (6 miles) southwest of Como, Italy. It was certainly no panther, but Gianfranco Guidali who took the pictures suggested

it might be a true European wild cat. Park experts Mario Binda and Vittore Arrigoni were less certain: "From the photo it doesn't look like a wild cat. The tail of *Felis silvestris silvestris* is thicker and the muzzle does not match either. If authentic it would be anomalous because wild cats don't usually frequent lowland environments."

Meanwhile, a more traditional panther was observed at Ventas de Huelma, near Granada in Spain. The Guardia Civil searched for it in a helicopter, but in vain, although footprints were said to have been found. The last sightings of panthers in Andalusia were in 2013. A

**LEFT:** The 'ice volcano' that formed near Kegen, Kazakhstan. **BELOW LEFT:** 13 stray dogs with bright blue fur were found at the Dzerzhinskoye glass factory in Russia. Their fur tested positive for blue pigment.

day later, the black cat was photographed, and experts promised it would be caught within hours – but no capture was made. A week later, national papers reported that "the panther has evaporated", but for all we know it may be seen again. In January 2021, another big cat appeared close to Disneyland Europe, near Paris. *La Provincia di Como*, 22 July; *El Ideal*, 14 Sept; *La Información*, 15 Sept; *La Vanguardia*, 20 Sept 2020; <https://strangereality.blog>

## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

A none-too-bright young man broke into a flat in Leck, Germany, and stole instruments worth some 3,000 euros, but only escaped with his musical booty after it had started to snow. It didn't need Sherlock Holmes to follow the criminal's footprints to his home in the freshly fallen snow. *shz.de*, 17 Feb 2021.

After a burglary in Hennef, Germany, on 9 January 2019, the 41-year-old victim pressed charges against his 31-year-old neighbour. When both appeared in court, the burglar explained that he had discovered child pornography in his target's home. A police search soon revealed this to be true. The burglar was fined 750 euros, but the victim was given a year's suspended sentence for the possession of pornographic material.

The man appealed, and in the new trial became entangled in ever more complex lies. The police obtained the authority to search his parents' house in Stralsund, on the Baltic coast, and found material showing that he was also involved in active child abuse. As a result of the burglary, he faced a new trial for child rape in February 2021. *Rhein-Sieg-Anzeiger*, 27 Feb 2021.





KARL SHUKER finds a tantalising new clue in the case of the mystery mosaic macaw



ABOVE LEFT: Police load Thorak's rediscovered 'Striding Horses' onto a truck in 2015. ABOVE RIGHT: A detail from the mysterious mosaic – a Tunisian fake?

### SOLVING A ROMAN RIDDLE?

In last month's column, I drew attention to a curious marble mosaic panel identified by auction house Christie's as being of Roman origin, dating from approximately the 2nd century AD, and sold as such by them on 11 December 2003. What made this mosaic panel so curious was that in addition to depicting four familiar species of European bird around a drinking vessel (although three of these were misidentified in the catalogue listing), it also depicted a blue-and-yellow macaw *Ara ararauna*. This exotic species of parrot is native to South America, a continent that would not be discovered by the West for another 1,300 years. So how could its presence on a Roman mosaic be explained? If assumed to be a genuine mosaic, as deemed by Christie's, it would constitute significant evidence that the Romans were trading with South America many centuries before the continent's existence was known to Europe. Yet if this were so, why had the macaw mosaic not attracted attention from historians and archaeologists? My detailed online search had failed to uncover any evidence of such attention.

I was mystified, but have since obtained some information that may solve the puzzle. After reading my previous report, fellow cryptozoological investigator Andy McGrath informed me that he had discovered that the mosaic panel in question had featured on the cover of Christie's sale catalogue. This fact proved invaluable in uncovering some additional information. In early 2021, a fascinating book entitled *Hitler's Horses* (Random House, 2021) by art detective Arthur Brand was published. It documented the extraordinary story of how 'Striding

Horses' by Nazi sculptor Josef Thorak – a spectacular statue featuring two gigantic bronze horses, which had been a favourite of Hitler but had later vanished, assumed destroyed during the bombing of Berlin – was rediscovered via some complex, dangerous sleuthing.

Brand recalled a conversation with an enigmatic figure from the art world named Michel van Rijn, during which van Rijn had shown him an auction catalogue whose cover depicted a Roman mosaic panel depicting five birds around a drinking vessel, one being a South American blue and yellow macaw! Laughing, Brand asked where this "forgery" had originated. Here is van Rijn's reply: "Tunisia, I think. There's a village just south of Sousse where they churn out fake Greek and Roman mosaics. A regular goldmine."

I am unaware of any formal confirmation that this particular artefact is indeed a fake. Yet in view of what van Rijn had said about it and the mosaic fake factory operating near Sousse, this may be why the macaw mosaic panel has failed to overturn the accepted mainstream views concerning early Roman trading! Andy McGrath, *pers. comm.*, 25 Feb 2021.

### HERE BE DRAGONS?

In a major new scientific scheme to highlight the dire biodiversity shortfall in which the vast number of species currently alive today remain undiscovered, ecologists Prof. Mario Moura (now at Brazil's Federal University of Paraíba) and Dr Walter Jetz (of Yale University) have created a model that extrapolates where undiscovered terrestrial vertebrate species may still exist. They have achieved this remarkable feat by incorporating biological,

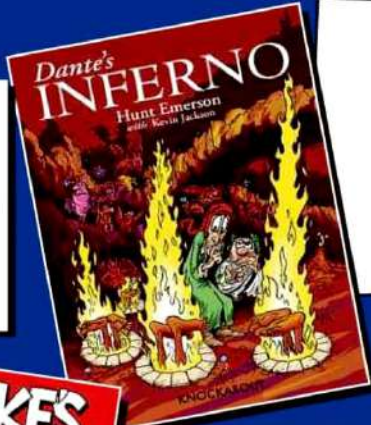
environmental and sociological factors that are associated with the 30,000+ terrestrial vertebrate species already known to science, because the chances of being discovered early are not equal among species. That is to say, the more obvious ones have probably already been found. Consequently, large known species with broad distribution ranges are less likely to have still-undiscovered relatives than are smaller known species inhabiting tiny, relatively inaccessible habitats.

Having said that, the preponderance of large new mammal species discovered in Indo-China during the 1990s, plus the ongoing stream of new monkeys in Brazil and lemurs in Madagascar, demonstrates that large unknown mammals can certainly exist in more discrete, inaccessible, unexplored regions. And indeed, Moura and Jetz consider that the most likely regions to harbour undiscovered vertebrate species are Madagascar, Indonesia, Brazil and Chile, collectively possessing the potential to reveal as many as a quarter of all future discoveries of new vertebrates, and with about half of all vertebrate unknowns likely to be discovered in tropical moist broadleaf forest environments. Their map may not reveal any hidden dragons in the way that early maps were liberally annotated with fire-breathing fauna, but if it can reveal where to look for still-undiscovered vertebrate species and thereby save them from vanishing before their existence had even been confirmed, it will be a truly marvellous creation. [www.sciencealert.com/new-map-reveals-all-the-places-on-earth-where-undiscovered-creatures-may-be-lurking](http://www.sciencealert.com/new-map-reveals-all-the-places-on-earth-where-undiscovered-creatures-may-be-lurking); [www.nature.com/articles/s41559-021-01411-5](http://www.nature.com/articles/s41559-021-01411-5).



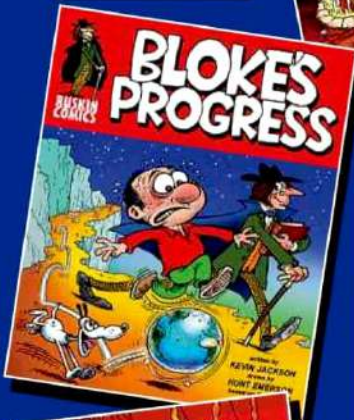
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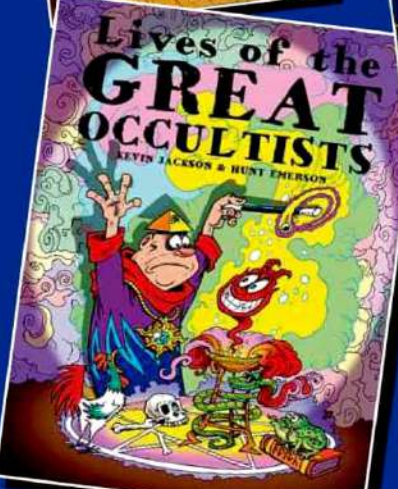
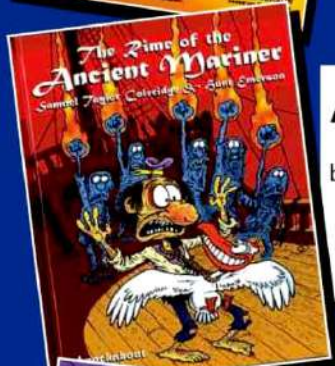
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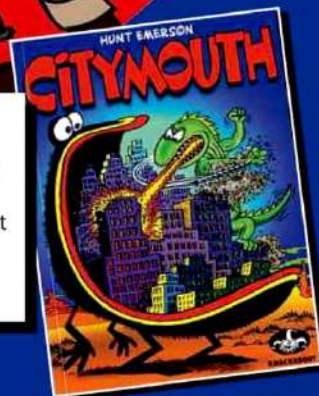
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# THE C NSPIRASPHERE

Are Vice-President Kamala Harris and her husband part of a shadowy British plot to take over the United States? **NOEL ROONEY** gatecrashes the Pilgrims Society in search of answers...

## PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

A new twist on an old grand narrative has emerged since the inauguration of Kamala Harris as the 49th Vice-President of the USA, and the first woman to hold that office. Ms Harris's husband, Douglas Emhoff (who holds the interesting distinction of being the first Second Gentleman of the USA) worked, up until his wife's inauguration, for the US law firm DLA Piper, and DLA Piper is the law firm for the Pilgrims Society of the United States, partner organisation to the (slightly more senior) Pilgrims of Great Britain. This is not a pious offshoot of the Pilgrim Fathers, but a society founded in 1902 to foster the 'special relationship' between the UK and the US.

While the Pilgrims might look, on the face of it, like an exclusive dinner club for toffs (a glance at their website would give that impression), to some in the Conspirasphere, they are something rather deeper and darker. The special relationship is, of course, to those who are connecting the dots, a kind of shibboleth for the mysterious matter of the United States still being a vassal state of the British Empire; and talking of arcane shibboleths, it has not gone unnoticed in the C-sphere that the Pilgrims refer to themselves as scions of Great Britain rather than the more historically apt, but decidedly less imposing, United Kingdom. Despite the overwhelming whiff of cigars and port in the society's PR, they do have some serious clout; the new US Ambassador to the UK traditionally makes his first speech to the Pilgrims, and the new UK ambassador to the US does likewise.

DLA Piper has its own conduit to the powers that be, and not in a nice way. The firm's former chairperson is Nigel Knowles; while Knowles



## *Kamala has form with the denizens of the Conspirasphere*

is not himself particularly well-known, his father was 'vice-Admiral' (sic) of the RAF, and a founder of the Five Eyes alliance, connecting spooks across the English-speaking world, and his great grandfather founded the Metaphysical Society (society types do love a Society) whose famous members include Alfred Tennyson, TH Huxley and Arthur Balfour. This little gathering, it is claimed, is the basis of the Satanism that underlies the New World Order.

So what has this to do with the ascension of Joe Not-Trump's right-hand woman? Well, it appears that Kamala Harris is not just, as many American Patriots fear, coming for your guns; she is in fact the point person for the overt takeover of the US by agents of the British crown, of which the VP is one. Researchers (I regularly do a sort of self-double-take when I type that word in this context) have apparently unearthed proof that Harris is actually a citizen of the British Commonwealth. Allegedly she is in an arranged marriage with Emhoff, which (somehow) gives her a "direct line of communication to the

Queen of England". From there, it's a relatively modest synaptic spacewalk to fronting the invasion of America.

Kamala has form with the denizens of the Conspirasphere; when she was Attorney-General of California, she denied the parole application of one Sirhan Sirhan, the alleged lone-nut assassin of the late Robert Kennedy in 1968. She explicitly and publicly refuted Sirhan's claim that there was another shooter involved in Kennedy's murder, despite what many would argue is copious evidence to support his allegation. So her cabal credentials go back a long way.

Many people on the alt-right and in the C-sphere are convinced that Ms Harris is the de facto president, given that Mr Biden has looked rather frail, and not in total command of his mental faculties, since he took the presidency in an election that millions of Americans fervently believe to have been rigged. His recent (and first) official press conference was not designed to instil confidence; it gave every impression of being scripted, and Mr Biden was having trouble following the script. And then he contrived to fall up the steps of the presidential aircraft (it could be argued that, if you're old and frail and you're going to fall, it's best to fall upwards). The upshot of all this evidence (to some) that

the President is not up to the job leads to the inevitable conclusion that Harris is actually running the show.

So if she is the real President, and her husband worked for DLA Piper, and DLA Piper is the law firm of the Pilgrims, and she has that direct line of communication to HRH, the logical assumption – among those for whom logic follows a very particular path – is that the British Empire is flexing its arcane muscles through the Pilgrims and affirming who is actually in charge of the New World Order. (Research – there's that double-take again – has apparently shown that NWO is in fact a recognised synonym for Pilgrims of Great Britain.)

Somehow, the intrepid researchers (they are mainly associated with a website/blog called Americans for Innovation) have also managed to drag the currently eminent (in conspiracy terms) Klaus Schwab into the mix. Schwab, head honcho at the World Economic Forum, is of course the principal figure behind the Great Reset ("you will own nothing, and you will be happy") but it appears that he, despite being neither a British nor an American citizen, is in the very deepest of cahoots with the Pilgrims, and either he is implementing their plans, or they are implementing his (you will own everything, and you will be even happier). So that probably puts the Pilgrims in the frame for coronavirus too. There; all that conspiracy, and we haven't mentioned Hillary Clinton even once...

**SOURCES:** <https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2012/02/02/calif-ag-says-sirhan-sirhans-appeal-should-be-denied/>; <https://americans4innovation.blogspot.com/>; <https://forbiddenknowledge.tv.net/the-british-pilgrims-have-taken-over-america/>; [www.pilgrimsociety.org/](http://www.pilgrimsociety.org/)





# MURDER MOST WEIRD

Oregon killer looks to time travel to correct a "horrible mistake", plus matricide and marijuana in Utah

## UNDOING BAD THINGS

In 2016, Anna Repkina, a 26-year-old Muscovite, broke up with her boyfriend of seven years. The fun-loving Russian woman, a fan of rock music and cats, decided to join some online dating sites, and it was via one of these that she met William Hargrove, from Oregon, also 26 and a Russophile. Repkina decided to fly to the USA to meet and spend the Christmas holidays with him. She returned home after the 10-day trip having been given an engagement ring by Hargrove. She made plans to move to Oregon and marry him in 2017. However, she was unaware that Hargrove was also dating Michelle Chavez, from whom he was renting a room. Chavez was living with her husband in a loveless marriage, and was engaged in a passionate affair with Hargrove. When she learned of his marriage proposal to Repkina, Chavez was both shocked and angry. She pressurised him to end his relationship with the Russian, and issued an ultimatum: to choose between her and Repkina. Within days, Repkina was dead.

The day after Easter 2017, her body was found on a remote Oregon road. She had been killed by a single shotgun blast to the back of the head. Among the detritus at the scene, police found a KFC receipt which they were able to trace to Hargrove, who, in the days following Repkina's death, exhibited some strange behaviour. Checks on his computer usage revealed he had been scouring the Internet for information on time travel. He had saved screenshots of web pages showing how to perform a spell enabling one to travel back in time. Records of Hargrove's WhatsApp conversations also showed him asking for practical time travel advice. He told a friend that he wanted to correct a horrible mistake his "best friend" had made, saying that he needed to go back in time "to keep from losing the woman that should be my wife". So desperate was he that he offered his soul as a reward to strangers on the Internet who might be able to



help him.

Hargrove was caught on CCTV at a number of ATMs, withdrawing cash from Repkina's account. One video recorded him making a \$200 withdrawal from a machine at a gas station, then engaging its staff in conversation, during which he hugged one of them while crying that his girlfriend had left him. In total, he withdrew \$800 from her account, with which he made a car insurance payment, went shopping at Walmart for *Star Wars* LEGO, and bought some cigars and sweets. He was found guilty of murder in October 2020 and faces a mandatory minimum 25-year sentence. *cbsnews.com*, *Independent*, 30 Oct 2020.

## DANCING WITH DEATH

A 23-year-old man from Springville, Utah, has been charged with murder in the first degree, as well as domestic violence in the presence of a child and unauthorised possession of

a firearm. Mike Lopez is said to have shot and killed his mother with a shotgun, afterwards dancing with his 14-year-old sister beside the body. Police say that on 23 December 2020, Lopez walked into the dining room where his mother, Victoria Ramirez, 43, was sitting with his two sisters, aged 14 and 17. "All four were seated at the dining room table when (Lopez) pointed a shotgun directly at the victim," the charges state. "Mike turned towards his 14-year-old sister and they gave each other a head nod." The 14-year-old is then said to have locked herself in a bathroom while the 17-year-old remained outside the door.

Mrs Ramirez told her son, "I know you're going to kill me, and I love you", before Lopez fired a single shot which struck his mother in the neck and face, killing her almost instantly. The 14-year-old girl then came out from the bathroom and stroked her mother's hair before Lopez

grabbed her arm and the two started dancing next to their dead parent.

The 17-year-old sister then locked herself in the bathroom, where she climbed out of the window and ran to call the police, who arrived to discover Lopez lying in a filled bathtub. While being told by a policeman he was under arrest for shooting his mother, Lopez told the officer: "Someone told me to do it."

Police say Lopez had THC in his system at the time of arrest. The 17-year-old sister told police she believed Lopez had been providing marijuana to her 14-year-old sibling, and said her brother had "been acting really strange lately... he has been meditating a lot where he claims to go to different dimensions and talking about a lot of bad people." She said he had bought a shotgun and a handgun the day before.

When police interviewed the 14-year-old girl, officers noted that she "was acting very strange", telling detectives that she and her brother "have been together a lot lately and they take turns sleeping so they can watch over one another". She also claimed it had not been her mother who had been shot and "did not show any emotion" during the interview. *deseret.com*, 4 Jan 2021.



## CREATURES ON THE LOOSE

Wolves on the M5, Bigfoot in the House, snakes on the street, dino in hospital



**ABOVE LEFT:** The deer carcass found on Minchinhampton Common near Stroud. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A visitor to Oklahoma's Honobia Bigfoot Festival; last year's event was cancelled due to the pandemic, but Justin Humphrey (below) aims to keep the famous cryptid on the state map by proposing a Bigfoot hunting season.

### BIG CAT AND WOLF SHOW

In January 2021, while driving along the M5 at around 4am, a lorry driver saw a wolf crossing the motorway between junctions 12 and 13, about six miles (10km) northwest of Stroud and eight miles (13km) southwest of Gloucester. He saw the animal from a distance of approximately 25 yards (23 metres). The driver checked images of wolves online when he returned home, and also spoke with local wildlife enthusiast 73-year-old Frank Tunbridge, who said that based on his description he had most likely seen a light grey wolf. Other wolf sightings have been reported in the area, and also in January, large wolf-like paw prints in the snow were spotted by a woman out walking on Edge Common, about four miles (6.5km) from Junction 12. "The trail the animal left behind was in a straight line with purpose," remarked Mr Tunbridge, "unlike a large dog's mode of locomotion... dogs meander here and there."

He believes that lockdown and the ensuing absence of people in usually busy places has encouraged wildlife to move back into these areas. "So even with the large expanse of housing, business parks, roads and human activity,

these urban fringe predators live and exist in our midst." Mr Tunbridge, who runs a hotline for big cat sightings, argues that an abundance of wild deer throughout the UK (thought to be around 3.5 million) and their own encroachment into urban areas is one explanation for the increased number of ABC (alien big cat) sightings on the edges of towns and other built-up areas. One of the arguments against the existence of ABCs has been diet – what native British wildlife would be sufficient as prey to sustain these large predators, which, if reports are to be believed, exist and thrive in numerous parts of the country? The prevalence of small deer such as muntjac, together with an increase in discarded meat waste as a result of the proliferation of fast food and takeaway outlets, may explain how big cats and wolves could survive and why they are increasingly being spotted in semi-urban areas. A recent deer carcass found on Minchinhampton Common, three miles (5km) south of Stroud, appeared to display "many of the signs of a big cat kill, with marks of a large carnivore having used the

throat area to dispatch it," said Mr Tunbridge. "I have had similar situations reported to me in the past", he added. [gloucestershirelive.co.uk](http://gloucestershirelive.co.uk), 13 Mar 2021.

### HUNTING BIGFOOT

Justin Humphrey, a member of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, wants to establish a Bigfoot hunting season. Humphrey represents District 19, a large area of south eastern and south central Oklahoma known for Bigfoot sightings. He lives in Lane in the south east of the state, 120km (75 miles) from Honobia, which normally hosts an annual Bigfoot festival and conference, which has been cancelled this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

House Bill 1648 proposes: "an Act relating to game and fish; directing the Oklahoma Wildlife Conservation Commission to establish a Bigfoot hunting season; providing for codification; and providing an effective date... The Commission shall set annual season dates and create

any necessary specific hunting licenses and fees." If passed, the Act would become effective from 1 November 2021. [ktul.com](http://ktul.com), 20 Jan 2021.

### MORE SCOTS PYTHONS

In January and February 2020, several dead pythons were found in three separate Scottish locations – Lanark, Aberdeen, and Musselburgh beach, East Lothian. Also in February, 13 pythons were dumped behind a Sunderland fire station, with a further 16 being found in the same place two weeks later (FT392:15). 2021 has seen another Scots python mystery, with a 14ft (4.25m) snake being found on a street in Greenock, Inverclyde. The python was reportedly a "fine specimen in good body condition" but, having been left overnight in the cold, unfortunately succumbed to the freezing temperature and later died at a local vet's surgery, despite attempts to revive it with gentle warmth.

"We were all disappointed there was not a happier outcome," said a vet spokeswoman. "But considering this type of snake prefers a climate more akin to Florida, the sub-zero temperatures experienced while on the loose outdoors in Greenock would not have been conducive to long-term







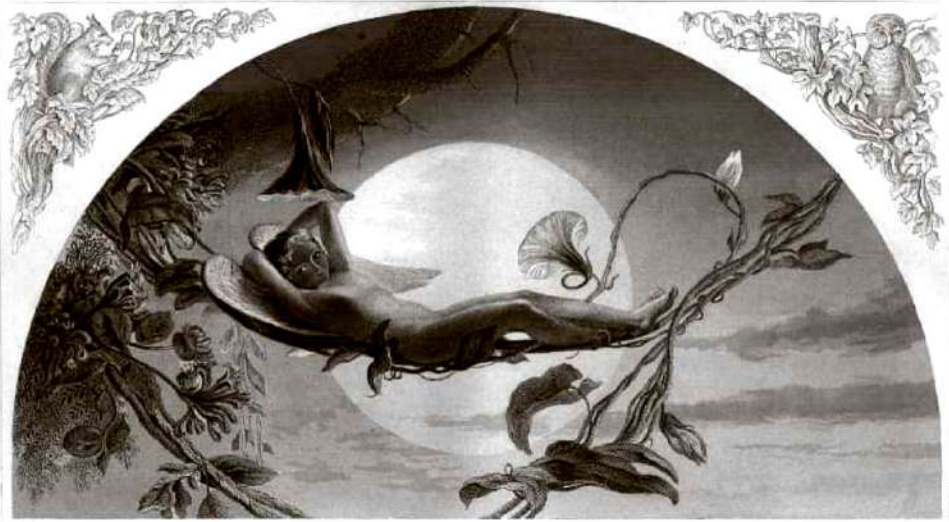
survival." Police say the snake's owner has been traced and their enquiries are ongoing, but also stated that they have no information regarding photos circulating on social media depicting another dead snake, said to have been found near Greenock. *BBC News*, 3 Feb 2021.

## PORTERSAURUS EX

A hospital porter who dressed up as a dinosaur while at work in a Republic of Ireland hospital has lost an appeal against unfair dismissal, during which an adjudication officer from Ireland's Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) found the man's sacking to have been reasonable, proportionate and fair. The dinosaur issue first arose in April 2019 after a clinical nurse manager reported that that porter had been working in a dinosaur costume, distracting staff from getting on with their work and disrupting the evening drug administration round. A representative of the unnamed hospital told the WRC hearing that on 11 April 2019, the porter had been unable to perform his duties due to being under the influence of alcohol, prescribed medicine, or unprescribed drugs.

The hospital's Occupational Health Consultant (OHC) referred the porter to a rehab programme after it was confirmed that the man had tested positive for cocaine and benzodiazepine and that he had an addiction to cocaine and alcohol.

At the hearing, the porter's union representative argued that the hospital had not taken into account the mitigating circumstances that he was suffering from depression and anxiety. But hospital management representatives stated that the porter, who had been employed there for six years, had refused to comply with their OHC's recommendations, made during a consultation four days after the dinosaur incident, that he attend a rehab programme. He had also been absent from work for 20 weeks without notifying HR, breaching the hospital's absence policy that requires the production of a medical certificate. *irishexaminer.com*, 2 Mar 2021.



## FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

### 'REMEMBERING' CHILDREN

There are spiritual experiences that seem to be universal. These elements of, to use a happy phrase of Aldous Huxley's, 'neurotheology', include: ancestor encounters at death, the dissolution of self in raptures, 'life reviews' and out of body experiences. Experiences of this kind are not taught or learnt. They depend on our hardwiring. They can be interpreted, according to taste, as chances of cognitive engineering or the moments we reach out to touch the divine. One other possible example of neurotheology is 'remembering' children.

Some infants report (without recourse to hypnotism) memories from past lives. These have been documented in several studies including those by Jim Tucker of the University of Virginia. In the most striking cases there are, it is alleged, verifiable facts carried over from pre-natal experiences. It would be easy to explain reincarnation as something acquired from religious beliefs: in India, for instance, claims of reincarnation among children might be a feature of pervasive Hindu convictions. What is fascinating about Tucker's studies, though, is that he has predominantly researched 'remembering' children in the United States, in a society where reincarnation is a minority interest. Indeed, in some cases the families he researched were hostile to the idea.

Are 'remembering' children to be found in every society throughout history? The first point to make is that many ancient religious traditions contain ideas about reincarnation. These range from indigenous beliefs in the Americas about ancestors being reborn into clans; to ancient and mediæval Germanic, Irish and Welsh stories of transformation and rebirth; to Buddhism and Hinduism where reincarnation takes centre stage. The second point is that under the three great monotheistic traditions reincarnation contradicts the idea of eternal other-worldly reward or punishment. If, for example, a 'remembering' child was born in Italy c. 1400, his family would have seen any pre-natal memories as a threat to orthodoxy. Little Giovanni's memories of dying in battle under the banner of Siena would have been given short shrift. We might expect then a lack of accounts from

areas where Christianity, Islam and Judaism dominated. With near-death experiences we have literally hundreds of years of Western accounts to build upon and to compare with one another. With 'remembering' children we have, in the West, only recent accounts. Is this because 'remembering' is something new in Western societies? Or is it maybe that we are seeing the emergence of a phenomenon that has been hidden by religious sensibilities for generations? Are we dealing, in short, with social conditioning or with neurotheology and a human universal?

LITTLE  
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## Drones, data and wobbly witnesses

NIGEL WATSON surveys the latest sightings and ufological news from around the world

### CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

John Ratcliffe, former Director of National Intelligence, claims that US government agencies have gathered lots of UFO data that has been kept secret. Fast-moving objects that have broken the sound barrier without causing a sonic boom have been seen by pilots and multiple sensors have detected unusual aerial phenomena. Many, he admits, have plausible explanations. "But," he said, "there are instances where we don't have good explanations for some of the things that we have seen." His comments have fuelled a frenzy of anticipation for a report scheduled for release in June, under the Intelligence Authorization Act, to the US Congress that will provide details of everything US intelligence agencies know about UFO sightings.

In the meantime, through FOIA requests, The Drive website reported that three US guided missile destroyers, the *USS Kidd*, *USS Rafael Peralta* and *USS John Finn*, were buzzed by 'Unmanned Aerial Vehicles' (UAVs) on the nights of 14-15, 25 and 30 July 2019. They were about 100 miles (160km) from the Californian coast, and a nearby cruise ship, the *Carnival Imagination*, also reported seeing five or six objects flying over the destroyers. The UAVs carried out brazen manoeuvres in poor weather conditions, and in one instance on the night of 14 July a white light was seen hovering over the *Rafael Peralta*'s helicopter landing pad. Even though it was night time, with reduced visibility and the ship travelling at 16 knots, the UAV was able to hover over the pad for over 90 minutes. All these factors would indicate the light was attached to a very advanced drone. The Navy, Coast Guard and FBI investigated the matter and failed to provide an adequate explanation for the sightings. Perhaps we will learn more in the forthcoming report in June. [www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/39913/multiple-destroyers-were-swarmed-by-mysterious-drones-off-california-over-numerous-nights?](http://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/39913/multiple-destroyers-were-swarmed-by-mysterious-drones-off-california-over-numerous-nights?)

### MEMORY METAL

Anthony Bragalia has announced that his FOIA requests to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) has turned up 150 pages of technical documents "on possible ways to use strange, futuristic materials. This material, inspired by UFO debris analysis, has the potential to control the speed of light, remember its original shape when deformed, and can promote the invisibility of objects." Kevin Randle on his 'A Different Perspective' blog is less impressed by Tony's revelations, since many of these documents have already been



LEFT: Former Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe claims the US Government has been sitting on a lot of important UFO data.

released and they make no mention of UAPs, UFOs or extraterrestrial craft. The only link is that the FOIA officer mentions UAPs in his letter accompanying the documents.

[www.ufoexplorations.com/](http://www.ufoexplorations.com/); [kevinrandle.blogspot.com/2021/03/coast-to-coast-did-pentagon-reveal.html](http://kevinrandle.blogspot.com/2021/03/coast-to-coast-did-pentagon-reveal.html)

### MIND BENDING

Who needs government disclosure when we have spoon-bender Uri Geller on our side? He reveals that rocket scientist Wernher von Braun showed him a piece of UFO wreckage in 1974. On his Facebook page he says: "I felt it wasn't terrestrial – it was metallic, elongated and had a hue I have never seen before. It felt like it was alive. Like it was breathing. And the surface had a pearl-like quality that almost seemed to be in three-dimensional colour." Uri is no stranger to ET anomalies – he has previously claimed that John Lennon gave him an alien egg.

### UK UFO REPORT 2020

Collecting data from the public, organisations and government departments, Ash Ellis, who runs the North West UFO Research and Investigation Group, has compiled a detailed break-down of 484 UFO sightings reported in the UK during 2020. The majority (396) were made in England and there was a sharp increase in March and April due to the launch of SpaceX satellite trains. The most likely time to see a UFO was between 9 and 10pm on a Sunday, and the shapes seen varied from star-like (200), triangular (33), oval (31), disc (14) and cylindrical (8) to unknown (46). On Hynek's classification scale there were only three reports of Close Encounters of the Third Kind and one abduction report. The full report can be seen on the [www.ufoidentified.co.uk](http://www.ufoidentified.co.uk) website. The site carries news of the latest UK sightings, where it notes there was

a cluster of five sightings of triangular craft in January 2021 and a further three sightings in February, and features detailed investigation reports by the NWUFORIG.

### RELIABLE WITNESSES?

Veteran Spanish UFO researcher Vicente-Juan Baluster Olmos is editing the first major volume dedicated to looking at the perception of UFO phenomena. He is calling for papers that examine any aspect of this topic, including "statistical, clinical, assessment, scaling, psychometric, comparative, evaluation, case studies, etc.," from specialists in "psychology, psychiatry, social sciences, mathematics, philosophy, anthropology, folklore, religion, clinical workers" and those who have studied UFO perceivers. *The Reliability of Witnesses* will be printed by UPIAR publishing house and made freely available on the [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) website. The deadline is September 2021 for a January 2022 release date. Contact Vicente-Juan at: [ballesterolmos@yahoo.es](mailto:ballesterolmos@yahoo.es)

### ABDUCTION NEWS

There has been a falling-out between abductee Travis Walton and Mike Rogers who was present when Walton was whisked away by a UFO. Mike posted on his Facebook page: "I am no longer to be considered witness to Travis C Walton's supposed abduction of November 5, 1975."

Mike has not clarified what he means by 'supposed.' Part of the dispute is about Mike being excluded from the planning stages of a forthcoming remake of *Fire in the Sky*. In other words, money and fame are at the root of the matter. <https://badufos.blogspot.com/2021/03/mike-rogers-says-that-he-is-no-longer.html>

Meanwhile, Calvin Parker, who famously experienced an abduction with Charles Hickson at Pascagoula in 1973, has undergone surgery for cancer. He will need further treatment, so our thoughts go out to him and we hope he makes a full recovery.

### BLURRED VISIONS

On his Twitter account, Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla, has published two charts. One shows the rise in camera resolution, compared to a chart showing that the resolution of UFO pictures has not changed at all. This is his strongest argument against the existence of alien visitors to our skies.





## Don't forget the Y-Files

JENNY RANGLES worries that a new generation doesn't understand the real purpose of UFO research

Like many people, I've had more time on my hands than expected over the past year and have noticed how the multiplication of TV channels has created a surge of UFO documentaries no pandemic can stop.

I avoided interviews for years due to my inability to travel, but today more because people want to ask about my identity politics rather than UFOs. Oddly, this puts me in the position countless UFO witnesses must have found themselves in over the years: trying to explain a suddenly changed reality that transformed their life, but which they cannot really share with others whose reality is unaltered.

Given the 40th anniversary of two of Britain's best-known cases last winter, I did relax my rule for a couple of 'chats'; and this focused my mind on something else – perhaps caused by advancing age. The questions I am expected to answer made me ponder what people think the purpose of investigating sightings is. I get asked: What do you hope to prove? My answer, to those who see UFO investigation as an epic quest, is not what they expect. For me, the point of investigating is not to expose a global conspiracy – real life is not *The X-Files* – nor is it to prove aliens are here (as they may or may not be). It is to solve riddles and help witnesses understand what happened. Finding answers, not fostering speculation, is the ufologist's goal.

The blank expressions that greeted me when saying this made me realise I was not stating the obvious, and that a generational change has occurred in what UFO research is perceived to be. Hence all those multi-channel exposés, retrofitting every incident in human history: aliens caused Pompeii to be destroyed and abducted Leonardo da Vinci to inspire his genius. Except, no, the first was caused by a volcano; and Leonardo just was a genius. Aliens are not a necessary plot device.

When a witness approaches a UFO investigator about something odd they saw, they hope you can tell them what it was – or at least reassure them about what it was not. That's why I helped create a code of practice for UFO investigators that prioritises and respects the witness and offers any help they need. We have a duty of care.

Of course, we want to learn things about the UFO phenomenon and are suspicious that the government are up to something, as they usually are – but I doubt they keep tabs on the Little Piddling UFO Society because they think you have cracked an

intergalactic conspiracy (though they might suspect you are intruding unawares into some military intelligence op and keep tabs to ensure you *do* think little green men were behind it rather than grumpy grey men in suits who would rather you 'keep watching the skies').

When a person needs help and thinks you have special knowledge, then you owe them some attention. If all you really care about is finding the 'big one' and are disappointed because you believe this witness simply saw someone sending up a firework to celebrate the end of lockdown number nine, then you are in the wrong job – because that 'big one' likely will never come, and you've made the phenomenon all about you. The truth is that a UFO sighting is about the witness, and by asking them to tell you their story you have an obligation: to listen, investigate and try to find out what really happened.

Many times, I have felt the relief that witnesses reveal when you help them work through a sighting. Take the woman at the supermarket whose son could not sleep at night because a UFO landed behind their home; she was terrified by a misguided but understandable fear that it might come back to abduct that child. This was a real trauma and identifying the truth (it was a crop-spraying helicopter suffering a brief malfunction) saved years of potential nightmares. Or working on a video taken by security staff at a shopping mall who filmed a late-night UFO buzzing the car park. They had to work there, alone in the dark at night; this was enough to spook anybody. To establish, with expert help, that the explanation was an insect and unusual optics was a strike-out UFO-wise, but put minds at ease.

These cases are the norm – not the exception – as 99 per cent of UFOs are not remarkable other than to those who see them. Resolution can be easy or hard, and take minutes or years. Yet they stay UFO cases in any reasonable sense: solving them is no failure. *The X-Files* was fun as fiction, but instead of pretending to live that dream ufologists should consider their cases as 'The Y-Files'. Because explaining why someone saw what they did gives them a neat story to tell the folks and erases ongoing trauma – a job well done, surely?

Of course, there are cases that defy even the best efforts. I will end on one without a resolution; perhaps a wider audience will offer up some answers at last.

It happened on a fine day in August 1989 where the witness was enjoying a walk in a nature reserve between Wolverhampton and Dudley. The wind was easterly at 20mph (32km/h). When exercising his dog, he saw a tennis-ball-sized "soap bubble" in the near distance that seemed to have a white feathery mass inside; it was following a leisurely path about 12ft (3.6m) off the ground. Not unduly concerned, as the origin seemed obvious, the witness looked around to see who had blown the bubble, but nobody was there. He climbed a stile for a better look as it drifted into a field containing a few horses. No obvious source appeared, yet it was visible even at some distance, suggesting he had underestimated the bubble's initial size, as it now passed from horse to horse – all seemingly unphased by the event. The witness was still just idly curious when the object changed direction and moved into the strong wind and straight toward him.

Now baffled and concerned, in the middle of nowhere with this oddity coming straight for him, he felt like the target. What was now a 'UFO' climbed over the wire mesh fence and in moments was just inches away, seemingly 'surveying' him.

"It was looking at me – there's no two ways about it," he insisted in the investigation. Of course, his conviction that it was a soap bubble 'popped' and he frantically looked around to see if someone was controlling a strange model (no drones back then). At close quarters, he could see the surface had an oily look with a dark patch that he later realised was his own reflection. But no controls. As he reported: "I could have leant forward and 'burst' the bubble, but was too scared."

The incident ended quickly. At the instant he thought about 'popping' the bubble, it visibly "kicked into gear" and sped off eastwards, covering about 30ft (9m) in a second, and was soon out of view.

The witness chose to wait a year to report this event, wisely thinking it must be some new remote-control device that he would doubtless read about. But it remained a puzzle. We never were able to come up with an answer for him beyond guesswork, and it has always bugged me: it was a singular failure to resolve a curious episode – to me, the essence of the term 'UFO'. Perhaps a reader can solve the riddle and finally bring resolution to this witness. Never say never is a pretty good watchword for the diligent ufologist with a bunch of 'Y-Files'.



# PHONE CALLS FROM THE DEAD

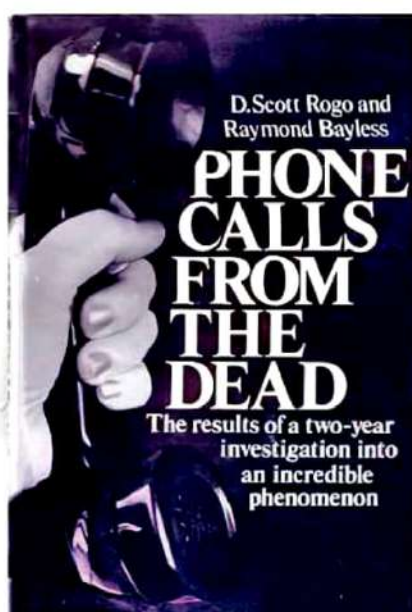
Parapsychologist D Scott Rogo collected cases of apparent 'phone calls from the dead' in his 1979 book of the same name, but **THEO PAIJMANS** discovers that stories of telephone messages from beyond the grave are as old as the technology itself – and they show no sign of stopping in the age of the mobile phone.

One evening in May 1943, Mary Cahill was comfortably lounging in an easy chair in her apartment in Endicott, New York. She was listening to her favourite radio show when the phone rang. The operator told her she had an incoming long-distance call and connected her. "In a confusion of sound I heard what seemed to be several persons talking all at once. Then I nearly fainted as I heard the breathless voice of my little girl, Peggy, 12," she recalled a decade later. Mary heard a "whirring as of many winds" and a "continued mumbling of voices", but among these sounds was the voice of her daughter: "I talked to Peggy, but it was like talking through a storm. Then silence fell." After a while, Peggy spoke again: "Her voice called to me through a rushing as of great winds. The winds rose to a roar and then died in sudden silence." But Mrs Cahill's daughter had passed away six months before, and when the operator was asked to trace the call, she could find no record of it. <sup>1</sup> Mary had just received a phone call from the dead.

## ENTER THE PIONEERING PARAPSYCHOLOGIST

Unique as Mary's story sounds, there are many more just like hers. Cases like these were deeply buried in the paranormal undergrowth until American parapsychologist D Scott Rogo began to study them systematically in the 1970s. "Today it's socially acceptable to have certain psychic experiences, precognitive dreams, live in haunted houses or know someone who does," Rogo said in a rare newspaper interview in 1979. "But some psychic experiences are too bizarre and rare to be chic. They have a social stigma. If a newspaper reporter got a call from someone who said he just spoke to his dead father, that report would be put in the looney-tune file." <sup>2</sup>

Rogo had learned of the phenomenon by coincidence in 1967, when a medium told him of a friend of hers who had received a phone call from her dead son. <sup>3</sup> At first,



"I TALKED TO PEGGY, BUT IT WAS LIKE TALKING THROUGH A STORM. THEN SILENCE FELL."

he didn't take such stories seriously. "As a parapsychologist, I hear all sorts of tales," he explained. "However, I soon had cause to change my opinion, when, over the next 10 years, I started coming across more and more of these reports – and found myself totally incapable of explaining them away." <sup>4</sup>

Had it not been for Rogo's efforts this strange phenomenon might have forever lingered unnoticed at the farthest fringes of parapsychology. That changed with the publication of *Phone Calls from the Dead*, co-written with fellow parapsychologist Raymond Bayless. When it rolled off the press in 1979, Rogo was 29 years old and

it was already his 16th book on psychic phenomena. Parapsychological reviewers were critical: the authors had not used empirical research methods to collect and analyse their data, they said. <sup>5</sup> The media, on the other hand, loved it: "The accounts related in the 'Phone Calls' chapter are eerie and mind-boggling. For those having never experienced such a phone call, it is difficult to imagine the stories told by Rogo and Bayless as being true. But, the authors insist that they are, and their documentation is very firm," one reviewer concluded. <sup>6</sup>

*Phone Calls from the Dead* contains various accounts like Mary Cahill's, and Rogo checked her story too. He learned that a parapsychologist had received a letter from her several years previously. Her retelling of her experience in this letter was identical to the published report, so Rogo and Bayless concluded that her story was not dramatised or fictionalised. <sup>7</sup>

The cases Rogo and Bayless present were gathered through a nationwide survey they started among their peers. The duo discovered something else in the strange accounts they collected: not all the phone calls from the dead followed the same protocol. Despite the fact that the cases represented a wide variety of phenomena, all the reports could be filed in one of two categories. There's the brief phone call, an interaction often interrupted before the line goes dead or the conversation is otherwise terminated. This was labelled the 'type 1 call'. In other cases, the phone voice carries on a lengthy conversation with the recipient. "It seems almost as though these communications were well prepared and planned out in advance of the actual call," they note. They labelled this the 'type 2' call. <sup>8</sup>

## THE DEAD DON'T DEVIATE

What kind of person was D Scott Rogo? In May, 2019, British parapsychologist Callum E Cooper went to San Francisco to visit Rogo's archive, which is housed in the Californian Institute for Integral Studies. It was 40 years since *Phone Calls from the Dead* was published,







# Getting phone calls from dead ringers

By John Stark

**H**ERE'S THE SCENE: It's past midnight, you're sound asleep and the telephone rings. You jump out of bed, knocking the cat on the floor, stumble down the hall and pick up the receiver. It's your mother, and you're thinking, why does she always choose the worst times to call? Then reality hits. Ma's been dead for 10 years.

Worse still, she called and left a message with your answering service, or on your magnetic tape machine. First time in a decade mom's called, and you were busy.

Los Angeles parapsychologists D. Scott Rogo and Raymond Bayless spent several years researching case histories of people who claim to have received phone calls from dead relatives or friends; some messages are purported to have come in via amplifying equipment, telephone answering devices, telegraph machines and record players. The two parapsychologists compiled their work into a book, appropriately titled "Phone Calls from the Dead."

Twenty-nine-year-old Rogo was in San Francisco last week. The author of 16 books on psychic phenomena said, "I once thought the idea of the dead contacting people over the telephone to be blatantly ridiculous. But I kept hearing more and more accounts, and thought maybe there is something to it. I went to other parapsychologists and collected their findings. I wrote articles for various publications, and asked readers who had had similar experiences to contact me."

He found, most people who claimed to have gotten such phone calls were not frightened by them. "For most it was a reverential experience, especially for people who are religious and willing to accept the notion of life after death," he said. "There have been exceptions, however. One woman fainted. A psychiatrist at a major medical hospital in New York got a call from his dead mother and was in a daze for three days."

What is it the dead want? "Perhaps he or she is trying to relay information, or a message," Rogo said. "A grandmother we talked with got a call and the voice on the other end sounded just like her mother's. The voice said, 'Tell Scott N.' Scott was the living woman's grandson, and a few days later he was killed in an automobile crash."

Ida Lupino once got a call before World War II from her dead father, telling her where to find the deed to his property, which had been lost in England. There was a witness to this call; she's still alive, and we talked with her. Shortly after the death of mystery writer Edgar Wallace in 1932 his secretary cut a disc on an old 78 rpm record carrier. The voice of her dead employer was on the record; its message has never been made public."

But had some theories on how the dead may get through. Mr. Bell. When you pick up the phone, you are not



Examiner/Jeffrey Gorman

listening to a voice, but to electrical impulses mimicking human speech. Perhaps the dead have been able to set up electrical impulses imitating their own voices.

"Perhaps the dead can physically produce their own voices in the amplifier of the phone. One woman we talked with got a phone call from a dead relative in a hotel room. The hotel switchboard had no record of an incoming call. We are currently investigating a case where one person got a phone call from the dead on a disconnected telephone."

"A lot of people feel the experience is extremely private, and others are afraid of being ridiculed," Rogo said. "Today it's socially acceptable to have certain psychic experiences, pre-cognitive dreams, live in haunted houses or know someone who does. But some psychic experiences are too bizarre and rare to be chic. They have a social stigma. If a newspaper reporter got a call from someone who said he just spoke to his dead father, that report would be put in the 'hoax' column file."

Rogo, who was wearing a black three-piece suit, said he is not frightened by his work, and has no fear of death. "I look forward to dying," he said. "I don't mean that to sound morbid. I've been studying death for the last 10 years and give up a death will be the ultimate fulfillment of my research. I believe in life after death, and look forward to finding out if I've been right or wrong."

D. Scott Rogo

has

co-authored a

book called

"Phone Calls

from the Dead"

— one of the

cases he cites

is actress Ida

Lupino, who he

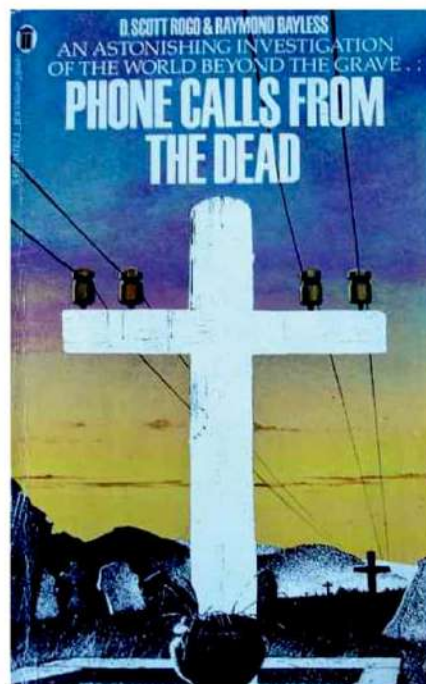
said got a call

about a lost

property deed

from her dead

father



LEFT: D. Scott Rogo spoke to the *San Francisco Examiner* about his work in 1979. ABOVE: A splendid New English Library paperback edition of *Phone Calls from the Dead*.

and sadly Rogo had passed away in 1990. "He kept meticulous records of everything. Even the correspondence he had with various people," Cooper told me. "Rogo was a walking encyclopedia of parapsychology. He was very thorough, also in his responses. Wherever he found a negative review of the research they had done or of his book, he replied point by point. He was very precise in explaining things fully as far as he could. Even when sometimes he knew he was in the wrong and he'd try and get himself out of it. Regarding the study of the telephone anomalies, he was extremely thorough. One of the most critical reviews of the book was by Roger Anderson in the *Journal of Religion and Psychical Research*. The review spanned several pages and Rogo replied point by point. It's the most extensive response regarding the finer detail about how he and Bayless went about collecting the cases, interviewing the people and then analysing such data by a process of thematic content analysis and explaining how this kind of methodology sits within the social sciences. He was very thorough and dedicated to the research he was doing."

Cooper's interest was longstanding: seven years before, in 2012, his *Telephone Calls from the Dead* was published, reappraising the cases that Rogo and Bayless had collected. Cooper also added new cases. "Do I think that Rogo's classification in 'type 1' and 'type 2' calls is still valid? As far as I can tell from my re-analysis, the more modern cases don't deviate from the ones Rogo and Bayless generated," Cooper explained to me. "Even when I have a mixture of old and new accounts, the characteristics of how the calls play out remain the same. The 'type 1'

## "SPIRITS SPEAK TO US THROUGH THE RADIO, THE TELEGRAPH AND THE TELEPHONE"

calls involve someone who knows someone is dead who receives a call that is very short and unresponsive. The 'type 2' call involves a receiver who doesn't know that someone has died, has a prolonged conversation that is a bit odd and they don't understand some of the things being said. Afterwards they discover this person has died, and yet the call took place well after that had happened. These cases still occur. The classifications remain valid and are clear general characteristics of how these calls play out and how people report them."

However, Cooper thinks it's best to take a cautious approach and not to jump to conclusions. "That doesn't suggest any kind of paranormal process taking place. We just know that in the context of how people perceive and report these to be anomalous, plus the way that they are carried out as telephone conversations, they fall into particularly consistent types."

During his analysis Cooper also looked at another 50 cases, running a further content analysis to see how the categories of call types developed. "Are these characteristics still appearing some 30 or 40 years on, or have things changed since we've had

mobile phones, e-mail, smartphones and text messages? They haven't really changed all that much. As far as the conversation characteristics go, they remain the same."

A case in point is the phone call from the dead phenomenon in Russia where it is widely discussed on several Internet forums that feature dozens of accounts. Whether these are true experiences, urban legends, hoaxes or creepypasta remains to be seen, but the basic ingredients of the stories are the same as in the West: voices from dead relatives drowned out in static or 'strange noises', anomalous SMS text messages, phones ringing at remote cemeteries where there's no network connection, or, like in Mary Cahill's case, many voices heard talking at once.<sup>10</sup>

## DECADES OF DISEMBODED PHONE CALLERS

But how old is the phenomenon? Rogo and Bayless found it difficult to write their book because nothing about phone calls from the dead had previously appeared in print.<sup>11</sup> Greek researcher Thannassis Vembos unearthed two old Greek cases from 1950 and 1953<sup>12</sup> — but were there more?

In fact, phone calls from the dead are as old as the telephone itself. Who, for instance, rang Mrs Wallace Ford 12 hours after the mysterious death of Hollywood star Thelma Todd in Los Angeles on the morning of 16 December 1935? The press called it "a ghost telephone call", while the police speculated about a prank made on an extension line. But Mrs Ford did not budge. "Despite all evidence which police say points to Thelma's death early Sunday, I know I talked to her on the



telephone at 4.10pm that afternoon... At first I thought the party said 'Velma' and I asked 'Velma who?' No, no, no, no, Thelma Todd, your little hot toddy. Get ahold of yourself, Toots!" According to Ford, Todd said she would bring a surprise guest over to the party in half an hour, but the famous actress never arrived.<sup>13</sup>

Famous Irish ghost hunter Elliott O'Donnell included a case about a ghost ringing a doctor to save a person who had suddenly become very ill in one of his 1920s collections of ghost stories.<sup>14</sup> Although these days O'Donnell has a reputation of making things up, the story demonstrates that the idea of the dead communicating with the living by phone was widely entertained. Ghosts simply moved with the times, as *Psychic Power*, a Chicago-based Spiritualist magazine, explained: "In this age spirits speak to us through the radio, the telegraph and the telephone."<sup>15</sup> And in *Light*, another Spiritualist magazine, one FR Melton recalled the experiences of his son. During the Great War the young man had been attached to a corps of wireless and ordinary field telephone operators. He often received "disjointed messages and parts of strange questions, nearly always unfinished" and was "quite at a loss to account for these peculiar occurrences... Were they trials on the part of our spirit friends, of a new mode of communication? Perhaps someday we shall know," Melton wrote.<sup>16</sup> The 1920s also saw the press widely repeat the yarn that Edison was working on a ghost telephone to communicate with 'the next world'. (for more on Melton and Edison's experiments, see Chris Josiffe, "A Little History of Spirit Technology", *FT363:30-37*).<sup>17</sup>

A few years earlier, in 1917, there had been a wave of phone calls from the dead in America and Brazil. In southern Indiana a 'ghostly caller' frightened the phone operators out of their wits. The women claimed that for a number of weeks they received long-distance calls each evening, and when they asked for the number, a female voice said: "Petersburg; I'm the dead operator from that place. I'm in the spirit land and want to talk with you about things on Earth and here where I am." It then chatted about who else was in the spirit land and how they got along with one another, and it sang religious songs. The voice also seemed to be able to identify who was in the operator room. Despite attempts to find out to whom the strange voice belonged, it remained a mystery. The year before, the head operator had died suddenly, although she apparently had had no personal knowledge of the people in that area, "while the unknown, who has a girlish voice, seems to know practically everybody in Spencer county."<sup>18</sup>

That same year, 'spirits' started to contact members of a Spiritualist circle by phone in Brazil. Unknown to Rogo and Bayless, it led to the publication in 1925 of the first book about phone calls from the dead.<sup>19</sup> According to its author, Brazilian Spiritualist Carlos Gardonne Ramos, they either made tapping sounds or spoke with clear and distinct voices, and this went on for years. "A spirit spoke in Italian, over the telephone. As I told him that I did

not understand the language in which he was calling, he withdrew, after wasting time for more than five minutes... The spirit of Father Manoel recited, at my request, the Lord's Prayer in Latin, a language which I and the other members of the 'Group' do not know. As soon as the Lord's Prayer ended, my watch struck nine o'clock in the evening, and the priest said: 'd'Argonnel, your watch is running slow'. Then he asked me if I wanted to write a prayer. I answered him affirmatively. So I went to get pencil and paper. The priest began to dictate the prayer... the interesting thing is that even the score was dictated by the spirit. As soon as the priest finished dictating, I hung up the phone..."<sup>20</sup>

When a voice boomed from a metal relay box connected to a telegraph at the railway station of the city of Barre, Vermont, in 1905, citizens became greatly agitated over this 'electric ghost'. One night a clerk heard the voice emanating from the relay box. A superintendent with decades of experience with telegraph equipment was called in to investigate, but he could not explain the strange voice: "...he heard two voices emanating from the box. They spoke of different subjects and had nothing in common. Part of the time whole sentences were plainly spoken and other times only a word or two was distinguishable." Spiritualists who heard the voices agreed that the messages were from another world.<sup>21</sup>

## HAUNTED TELEPHONE HORRORS

In 1901, a young woman in Oak Park, Illinois, became convinced that her telephone was haunted: "Some of her neighbours agreed with her, and now the instrument is a proper medium for ghosts, and credulous householders are afraid to answer the telephone bell lest some uncanny disclosure greet them," a newspaper observed.<sup>22</sup> That same year, Mary F Bringman, a medium from

Springfield, Ohio, claimed that a "mysterious phone on the wall of a large room" carried voices from the other world over to ours. Spiritualists were convinced. "I have talked through the telephone in Mrs Bringham's," said one. "There can be no mistake in this matter..."<sup>23</sup>

British Spiritualist WT Stead was told of an experience that happened in the summer of 1896. A Mr B was at his office, about two miles from his home, when the phone suddenly rang. "He immediately asked what was the matter, and received the startling reply: go to your father's house at once. Poor Nelly is dead." He hurried home and learned that Nelly, his sister, had died suddenly. "But what astonished him was that nobody had sent any message of the decease, which, in fact had taken place at the moment he had received the telephonic message."<sup>24</sup>

And if phones can become haunted or turn into portals for eerie voices from beyond, is it wise to actually have one in a graveyard? In 1886, a story circulated of an undertaker who received a phone call in the night, from a cemetery: "...the voice that called him was so strange that it made him shudder. It was so wonderfully distinct, and yet so slow, so cold, so faraway, that it sounded like nothing else he had ever heard." The ghostly caller only uttered a long drawn out hello before the bewildered undertaker hung up. When he verified the number, it had come from the cemetery – but no one had called from there. This went on for a few nights, after which the undertaker took the telephone out of his shop. He had it replaced afterward, "and though he has not since been called up by the voice from the other world he sits in nightly dread of it."<sup>25</sup>

The oldest account I found is from only two years after the invention of the telephone. Again, it involves a telephone line to a cemetery. It was newly installed between the



ABOVE: Hollywood actress Thelma Todd died in mysterious circumstances on 16 December 1935. Mrs Wallace Ford claimed to have received a phone call from Todd some 12 hours after her death.





**LEFT:** The Cemetery of the Holy Sepulchre in Orange, New Jersey, was the scene for an early case. **BELOW:** Laurent Kasprowicz has published a recent study of the phenomenon. **FACING PAGE:** British parapsychologist Callum E Cooper, author of *Telephone Calls from the Dead*, pictured in D Scott Rogo's archive.

office of a Mr O'Connor and the Cemetery of the Holy Sepulchre in East Orange, Newark, New Jersey, some two miles away. At first it worked fine, but three weeks later things changed. At four o'clock a furious ringing of the telephone awakened O'Connor and his wife. But no voice answered his through the speaking tube. The cemetery office was thoroughly checked and closed off, but the ringing went on for several nights. The man who had installed the telephone line could offer no explanation. "I confess the thing puzzles me. A Spiritualist friend tells me he is certain a spirit has sent the signals... Mr O'Connor's telephone has no connection, except with the cemetery..."<sup>26</sup>

### HIGH STRANGENESS ABOUNDS

The dead continue to call, and they have a habit of ensnaring those who profess more than a cursory interest in the phenomenon, something that was observed by Rogo. For instance, the reviewer of Callum E Cooper's book *Telephone Calls from the Dead* noted: "In fact, as I was writing this review, I received an email from my doctoral advisor detailing an account from a nurse who learned of an 'answer call' from one of her patients. In addition, a few months ago I had an experience in a play therapy session with a child that seemed to involve an ADC (After Death Communication - ed.) with a toy phone... I personally attributed both the email and my own clinical experience as indications that these experiments do indeed happen and mostly go unreported..."<sup>27</sup>

Communication by toy phone? There are even weirder cases to be found. In 2018, French sociologist Laurent Kasprowicz published his book *Des coups de fil de l'AU-DELÀ?* ('Phone Calls from the BEYOND?'). In it, he details his own experience that prompted him to study phone calls from the dead - even for such an outré phenomenon, this was a uniquely weird experience. It happened several years ago and started a few days after the death of Kasprowicz's dog. It started with a text message. The next day

## CELL PHONES LIT UP AND FLASHED ON AND OFF AND A VOICE ERUPTED FROM ONE OF THEM

his telephone started ringing incessantly, but when he answered it, nothing could be heard at the other end. Consultation with the phone company revealed that nobody had called him. Sometimes the intercom sounded at the same time the telephone rang. On two occasions the answering machine recorded the sound of joyous laughter. The machine, though, had started recording after the phone was picked up, something it normally didn't do. On another occasion, the phone rang and he heard a knocking or rapping sound coming down the line.

As in the Brazilian case where 'spirits' partly communicated through the phone by tapping, Kasprowicz deduced it was a code for communication. He was able to ask questions which were correctly answered; then he suddenly heard the sound of a dog breathing heavily. This took him aback, as his dog had died of lung cancer. The phone rang once more and whatever was on the other end again used tapping for communication, accompanied by the heavy breathing of a dog. After this, the phone calls stopped for good.<sup>28</sup>

Kasprowicz also collected 17 new cases, mainly from France and Belgium. Most involved calls with spoken messages, but there were also examples of phones ringing with nobody on the other end, and two instances of text message communications.

While he confirms elements also mentioned by Rogo and Bayless, such as

the synchronicity of receiving a phone call on the anniversary or time of a death, the inability of the operator to trace the call, the reassurances or warnings the disembodied voices utter, Kasprowicz notes that changes in technology mean that a few things are new: these days, phone calls from the dead can also be received by switched off cell phones or phones with dead batteries.

Author Sharon Hewitt Rawlette, who wrote a lengthy and informative review of Kasprowicz's book, notes: "I would add that, in the cases of seemingly paranormal phone calls that I came across in researching my book *The Source and Significance of Coincidences* (2019), I found many of these same patterns, though at the time I collected them I had not yet read Kasprowicz's book, nor Rogo and Bayless's or Cooper's."<sup>29</sup>

She mentions cases from other sources, plunging us into an eerie world of high strangeness. In one case, for example, the light in the room started flickering, two cell phones lit up and flashed on and off and a mechanical voice erupted from one of them. There's a fair amount of extreme weirdness in the earlier books too. Rogo, for instance, mentions two cases of a UFO witness receiving a phone call from the dead. The first was some 18 months before the witness actually saw a UFO, but the other sighting may have actually prompted a phone call from the dead. It involved a middle-aged woman who saw a UFO while driving in the country. It followed her car for several hours, then disappeared. Some time later, at home, a man rang up claiming to be 'Roger'. When

the witness said she didn't know anyone of that name, the voice claimed it was a family secret and that he was her brother. The woman thought nothing more of it until she learned that, years before she was born, her mother had given birth to a stillborn baby, which, had it lived, would have been given the name Roger.

30

Kasprowicz relates a case where a mother recognised someone who rang her as her son's dead friend. The son

had been involved in a car accident two weeks earlier in which his friend had died. The voice on the phone sounded panicky and desperately wanted to talk to her son. "Hurry, put him on please, I don't understand what's going on. It's like the world is turning bizarre..." it said. Then there is the case of a woman named Séverine who received a call on her answering machine three months after her mother died. A mention of the family's







deceased dog confirmed that it was her mother speaking, but while the quality of the recording was good she didn't recognise the voice at all.<sup>31</sup>

## THE FILTRATION FACTOR

Such odd details struck Kasproicz in particular. Intrigued by the parallels between ADC and poltergeist phenomena, he speculates that these phone calls from the dead are created by the psychokinetic actions of living individuals. In support of his line of thought he cites three cases from Rogo, Bayless and Cooper in which people received telephone calls

from living persons who'd intended to phone the recipients but hadn't actually done so.<sup>32</sup>

Rogo and Bayless considered such a mechanism as well, but reasoned instead that the dead could contact the living by manipulating electrical equipment. They point out the various stories in the canon of parapsychology and the early years of telegraphy in which several operators in England discovered that spontaneous communications 'from the dead' sometimes occurred over their equipment; they also state that "the 'phone calls from the dead' phenomenon is probably only one of many mechanical ways



the dead can reach us."<sup>33</sup> They conclude: "A person who receives 'a phone call from the dead'... might be witnessing the end result of an organised experiment on the part of the dead as they continually try to make contact with us. These experiments are bound to continue."<sup>34</sup>

Cooper, on the other hand, believes there is no "one sweeping explanation". He suggested to me: "What we have to do is to take each case of telephone anomalies on its own merit. We need to look into it, interview the people involved, look for the conventional explanations that we know of in terms of psychology, and also the dynamics of how telephones actually work and what things can take place that will produce the illusion of a seemingly remarkable telephone call from the dead. We have to refine the cases, have to go through this filtration process and sift out the wheat from the chaff. It's a very long-winded expedition."<sup>35</sup>

But what do all these seemingly disincarnate voices actually want, and why all the attempts to communicate? Perhaps we should give the final word to Rogo, the man whose curiosity started it all: "It strikes me as odd that these ghostly voices always act out a charade. They never directly explain that they are speaking from beyond the grave. Yet, they do discourage their contact from trying to meet with them. Why?"<sup>36</sup> Two years later, Rogo still hadn't found the answers he sought. "Eventually we may even be able to solve the mystery definitely. But that day is far, far away," he wrote on the last page of *Phone Calls from the Dead*.<sup>37</sup>

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# DEATH: THE FINAL FRONTIER

**DR LEO RUICKBIE** talks to Robert Bigelow, one of the world's most unusual billionaires. The onetime owner of Skinwalker Ranch, he has poured a fortune into space exploration, parapsychology and consciousness research and is now offering \$1.5 million in prize money for proof of the afterlife

It had been snowing in Las Vegas – something so rare that people were taking photographs of it – and Robert Bigelow had been delayed by the weather. John Waite's 1984 No. 1 hit 'Missing You' played over the phone while I waited to talk to the American billionaire about his latest project. I had done my background research; I knew there were people he had lost, and his project, an essay competition on life after death, was surely connected to that. And the total amount of prize money he was offering – close to a million dollars – for a subject blighted by underfunding was even rarer than snow in Vegas.

After making a fortune in commercial real estate, Robert Bigelow invested in his true passion – space exploration – setting up Bigelow Aerospace in 1999 (FT131:46??) and launching his first payload in 2006, the unmanned inflatable module Genesis I. But this has not been his only passion. Over the years, he has funded research into consciousness, UFOs and the paranormal. Working with the Defense Intelligence Agency, he helped develop the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (see FT362:2, 363:28-29, 398:21) – an early warning system for alien attack – and had once owned the infamous Skinwalker Ranch, an anomaly hotspot in Utah known for reports of UFO activity, Bigfoot-like creatures and poltergeist phenomena (see FT169:44-47, 363:38-41). And in June 2020, he established the Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies. Robert Bigelow is certainly not your average billionaire.

His assistant came back on the line and I was transferred through. The phone rang again briefly somewhere in his huge facility biting into the desert sands on the edge of Las Vegas. The global pandemic had ruled out a face-to-face interview. Instead, the disembodied voice of a man 9,000km (5,600 miles) away magically emerged in the air in front of me. Time zone differences meant that I was nine hours in his future. While he was enjoying the new morning, I was shrouded in deepening darkness, with only the small pool of light from a desk lamp to stop me thinking that this was like being at a séance.

The *New York Times* had broken the story of the contest and newspapers around the world quickly picked it up. It came out of the



LEFT: Bigelow Aerospace's Genesis I in orbit.  
FACING PAGE: Robert Bigelow.

at the age of 24. His grandson, also called Rod, also committed suicide, aged just 20.

"And then I lost my wife on 19 February last year. We were married for over 55 years."

Bone marrow disease and leukemia had taken his wife Diane at the age of 72. Being a billionaire does not make any of these things easier, but Bigelow seemed reconciled with his personal tragedies, seeing in them the origins of his interest in the subject.

"Most people 50 on up, or even 40

on up, have lost somebody, and that's how these things begin. I've had an interest over the years and I've formed different organisations."

He had begun with the Bigelow Foundation in 1992, working with then high-profile ufologists such as Bob Lazar; then there had been the National Institute of Discovery Science in 1995 (FT363:38-41), and his endowing the Bigelow Chair of Consciousness Studies at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas in 1997. He also served for a time as a director of the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man, established by pioneer parapsychologists Joseph and Louisa Rhine (now called the Rhine Research Center).

Bigelow had put \$3.7 million into establishing his Chair of Consciousness Studies in addition to long-standing patronage of the university reflected in the naming of two facilities, the Robert L Bigelow Physics Building and the Rod Lee Bigelow Health Sciences Building. The Chair was intended to be an annual appointment to allow a visiting scholar to develop and promote a consciousness studies programme. Coming from the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California, Charles T Tart, recognised as one of the early pioneers of transpersonal psychology and an authority on consciousness, was the first holder of the Chair. He was succeeded by the renowned near-death experience researcher Raymond Moody (who coined the term 'near-death experience' in his 1975 book *Life After Life*). It was an all-star line-up and should have boded well for the

## "I'M AWARE THAT I HAVE BAGGAGE, BECAUSE I'M KNOWN FOR BEING INVOLVED IN ESOTERIC SUBJECTS LIKE UFOs"

blue for the parapsychological community. I had been working on an edited collection of essays on exactly this subject called *Is There Life After Death?* I had drawn together some of the world's leading experts to discuss the problem. It had caused quite a stir and I was looking for a publisher – and now I had been trumped.

Just who was Robert Bigelow and why was he offering so much money now to answer a question that has baffled humanity for millennia?

### INVESTIGATING THE UNKNOWN

He spoke with a deceptively lazy American drawl, choosing his words carefully, but getting straight to the point.

"I have had four losses in my life, starting with my father when I was 18 – he died in a private plane crash as a passenger in a plane belonging to a friend of his – and then my wife and I lost one of our sons, and then we lost a grandson in 2011."

In 1992, his son Rod Lee committed suicide





COURTESY ROBERT BIGELOW

future, but Moody was the last appointment. I wondered what had happened.

"Well, the endowment process sometimes doesn't work as well as you hope," said Bigelow. "I won't get into any details about that, but after a few years I realised that the research was not moving and was suffering."

There was clearly another story there, but Bigelow kept talking, getting back to the present.

"When I formed the Bigelow Institute of Consciousness Studies last June, we looked into the number of organisations and the number of researchers in this field and it seemed as though the field needed some energising."

Did the rest of the field feel that it needed energising? There are several organisations already working in this area: notably, the Society for Psychical Research and the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena in the UK, and the Parapsychological Association and the Institute of Noetic Sciences in the USA, among others. I wondered how he saw his new Institute fitting into the existing culture.

"There's always territoriality among organisations, especially if there's a new kid

on the block – everyone is suspicious of the new kid on the block. Our philosophy is to try to be harmonious and not disrupt the work of other people, but to encourage more interest. Each one of these other organisations, I would assume, is not so insecure that they don't want to see growth and interest from everyone."

But there was more than just territoriality – there was Bigelow's own past to contend with.

"I'm aware that I have baggage," Bigelow volunteered, "because I'm known for being involved in other esoteric subjects, like ETs and UFOs."

Back in 2017, in another scoop, the *New York Times* revealed that the US Government had continued to secretly fund research into UFOs, or what the Pentagon now preferred to call Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP). Bigelow Aerospace Advanced Space Studies was connected with two inter-related Pentagon initiatives: the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (2007-2012) and the more sinister sounding Advanced Aerospace Weapons Systems Applications Program (2008-?). The US Department of Defense has since issued a number of contradictory statements about the nature of these

programmes. Whatever their true purpose, they are part of a jigsaw putting Robert Bigelow at the centre of serious, high-calibre UFO research, with his involvement going back at least to the 1990s. Bigelow had gone on record during a *60 Minutes* interview on US network CBS in 2017 as saying that he believed extraterrestrials existed. So why the apparent change in direction?

"The research in the UFO/ET field is fairly hostage to occurrences, to sightings, to interactions and there has not been, in the last decade or more, the kind of interaction of prior decades – from the 1940s to the 1990s – so there's been a significant reduction of interactions and sightings, with the exception of a couple of things, such as the craft exhibiting themselves off the coast of the United States; but, aside from that, there is not the amount of opportunity that there used to be. We had finished up a lot of work over quite a few years and we just felt that it was time to shift some attention to this very, very, very, important subject of survival of consciousness and let's focus on that for some long period of time, hopefully, and maybe we can help the community and the researchers."

That seemed reasonable, but given that he



had funded 'serious' research in the past, why make this a prize competition?

"It's a faster path, creating a contest," he said. "You can achieve greater acceleration and awareness – and that was my objective, to accelerate awareness of the topic. So I thought, let's have this contest – it's a way to begin. It hasn't been done before, certainly at least not with this scope. And what could it hurt, if it were properly put together?"

The international news coverage ensured that he had already accelerated awareness and everyone was talking about it in my own circle of parapsychologists and others who seriously study this subject. Nobody could ignore the huge amount of money he was putting up: \$500,000 for first place, \$300,000 for second and \$150,000 for third, with a further \$50,000 for each of eleven runners-up to give a grand total of \$1.5 million.

"This field relative to other kinds of scientific endeavours is poverty stricken," he explained. "It always has been poverty stricken. UFO research had a history of being poverty stricken until I got into it, with my own money and then with money that came through a programme that I was instrumental in helping to form and shape with many millions of dollars. So, I hope that, at the end of the day, I'm going to be viewed as having a positive effect on this."

## SPIRIT, TECHNOLOGY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Research into survival of death might be underfunded, but that's not to say it's a subject that has simply been ignored. Serious research in this area has been ongoing for some time – the organisation I work for, the Society for Psychical Research, was founded in 1882 – begging the question why the existing published evidence was not enough? What more do we need? What more could we have?

"The amount of literature that you can read is a mountain high and from so many diverse sources over the last 150 years – it's huge – and the care and attention that was paid to scientifically controlling mediums was admirable, the effort put in to legitimatising the mediums and the results and so forth was very well done, and you have world-class scientists involved in the 1800s. In the mainstream science community today, it's just the opposite: materialism has become another religion; science has become another religion. That has dominated the 20th century and probably will do so for the rest of this century."

What does that mean for alternative explanations?

"The idea of spirit and Spiritualism has taken a seat in the very back of the bus. And that's bad. That portends serious consequences, potentially, for the human race. It's very simple. You can graph this, it takes two lines. You position the beginning of the lines anytime you want – you can do it in 1800, you can do it in the Dark Ages, you can do it any time you want. And one line represents the spiritual growth of the human race, the other line represents the technological growth of the human race and nowhere, up to the very

current moment, do those two lines remotely coincide. Spiritual growth has practically flatlined. The 20th century was noteworthy for the greatest number of deaths and wars in human history. So, we have gone nowhere in over 5,000, maybe 8,000 years of recorded history. For technological growth, it is a whole different story. Technological growth is vertical. So the point is, how irresponsible is the human race willing to become if it has tremendous technological capabilities and maybe not the conscience of a spiritual type of humanity. How happy would you be to be an intelligent organism on another planet and all of a sudden you're being visited by Earthlings?"

It reminded me of a cartoon where the planet Earth is feeling unwell and goes to see a doctor, and the doctor says, gravely: "I'm afraid you have humans."

"You know," adds Bigelow, "We could be the Klingons for all we know."

The wording of the competition is precise: "What is the best available evidence for the survival of human consciousness after permanent bodily death?" "Consciousness" caught my eye: consciousness is a hotly debated if not controversial subject in modern science. The old psychical researchers (before the field became known as parapsychology) used to talk about the survival of the human personality – the idea that what survived was recognisably the same as that which had once lived, so that points of identifiability could be found with whatever it was that was apparently communicating from the beyond. But what did Bigelow think consciousness was?

"Well, my personal definition of consciousness would have to use and incorporate and embrace the power of thought. So, personality, to me, is incomplete. And we know from laboratory experiments that human thought is capable of acting upon objects in a macro or micro situation; so micro-PK [psychokinesis] and macro-PK are absolutely possible, and they have been proven and in camera-filmed situations, under controlled laboratory conditions... and that's only in one particular kind of category in the entire basket of psi. Whether it's clairvoyance or telepathy or remote viewing and on and on, thought is huge as a force. And it's completely outside all of mainstream physics."

"All of the world's universities, practically all I would imagine, when they produce a curriculum for physics and graduate students with PhDs in physics, don't get into the power of thought. That sub-atomic particles can't be identified until they are observed, well, that's as far as they'll go. It's very incomplete and our entire physics doesn't understand any of this area we're talking about at all."

I asked him to elaborate on 'thought'.

"Thought is key in terms of consciousness; the personality is just the skin covering thought, it is superficial, it is important, but it is not foundational. If you read the literature, from many diverse sources, thought is absolutely key and instrumental in creating everything on the other side, including transportation, including anything of surroundings,

whatever they might be. Thought is absolutely what you transition into as a spirit and you are emotional thought, depending on what level you're at, you are a human, you consist of human emotional thought."

According to Bigelow, the power of thought is not constrained to the human level.

"Thought is key," he continued, "so even forming the Universe, if we want to go out on the super macro scale. I don't buy off on a conventional creation of a Big Bang, for example. Cosmologists say, 'Well, the Big Bang exists because of the Doppler effect, everything going away from us, and therefore the only thing we know going away from us is something that has had an explosion of some sort.' I don't believe that. If you don't know what 95 per cent of the Universe is, what it consists of, then you only see five per cent and that's all you know. Well then, don't tell me that you know enough to tell me how it originated. I think there is more organisation than meets the eye."

"I think that thought and consciousness are synonymous, and I don't think that thought is contained in the brain alone. I think that the brain is just a tool that is used. I do believe in the separation of mind and brain, and that mind is now thought, because it's lost its container."

Another thing mentioned in the question was specifying *permanent* bodily death, which would seem to rule out looking at things like near-death experiences because of course the person is near death but comes back, is it intentionally worded like that?

"We did intentionally use that word 'permanent' so that we avoided the confusion around the state of death being temporary. We wanted to make it certain, so that there was no doubt, we want to go past the temporary condition. So whatever kind of out-of-body experience or near-death experience would be characterised by a temporary state, we want to avoid that. We want to say, OK, we are facing permanent death of your container, and in that circumstance, we're interested in the survival of your consciousness – you shouldn't have any, you shouldn't have any consciousness if you're brain dead, if you've been brain dead for half an hour, how on Earth are you coming back with information that you should have no business obtaining."

Traditionally, religion has always had a lot to say about life after death and the guidelines for the competition were open to religious interpretations, but had to go beyond statements of belief.

"Religion is terribly, terribly powerful in shaping and guiding people's minds, but anybody can quote scripture, so that's too sophistic to accept."

It brought us to the question of proof. Religion already believes that it has the proof, but it is scientifically unacceptable. So what would it take to convince Robert Bigelow?

"There are many ways to get to a point beyond a reasonable doubt in establishing proof. We're willing to accept witnesses. We acknowledge that it matters who the witnesses are or were and how many were



there. The witnesses matter in any kind of jury, in any kind of convincing the court of public opinion. Is this a good case that you're presenting? Witnesses really matter and proof beyond a reasonable doubt doesn't say you have to be 100 per cent sure, but you have to have 'beyond a reasonable doubt'."

It was a good point. If this were a court case, I think we would have already established that there was life after death.

"Absolutely, yes. This is not circumstantial evidence."

Bigelow has said on record before that he personally believes that there is life after death. What had convinced him of that?

"I've had personal experiences of different kinds, which always helps, and I have no other answers for the personal experiences that occurred, the way that they happened. There are no other causes that are imaginable – that are legitimately imaginable – and so it comes down to one cause and it comes down to the survival of consciousness and that these events were caused by some spirit or spirits on the other side. That's pretty profound to me. And then lots of folks I know have had very dramatic experiences as well. These are people who are related to me, people who work for me, people who don't work for me, people who are friends, and over many years, and their experiences are amazing and very in your face kinds of things for which there are no other prosaic kinds of explanations."

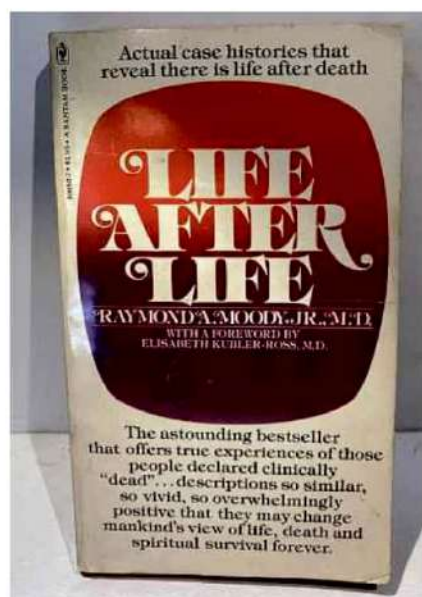
In the course of my career as a researcher in this field, I have been to allegedly haunted houses with ghost hunters, attended séances with mediums and talked to countless people about the ghosts they claim to have seen, and I have found that these are very subjective experiences that are only ever subjectively convincing. Was there more than personal conviction behind his belief?

"I've done a lot of study and research, of course: the literature is huge and I have a substantial library. The research was very well done and the conditions of trying to replicate or trying to produce events and... you know, so much effort has been put into this over so many years by some really good people and that just can't be ignored. It's not as though those people didn't exist and that they didn't know what they were doing. Just because we're in the 21st century, it doesn't make people in the 1800s stupid."

So much research had already been conducted, yet its power to convince appeared to have eroded over time, I suggested.

"I am an engineer by trade and so used to analysing and looking at things and trying to understand things, and for me it's not that difficult to connect all the dots. If you have a lot of really good sources from many, many authors, and you just take the time and trouble to read them, you get to a point where other kinds of explanations are just goofy. If I look at the amount of evidence, should I sweep that under the rug and pretend it doesn't exist?"

One might ask, why go to all this trouble to investigate this question when we are all



## "JUST BECAUSE WE'RE IN THE 21ST CENTURY, IT DOESN'T MAKE PEOPLE IN THE 1800s STUPID"

going to find out what happens eventually? But something Bigelow had touched on in previous interviews was the importance of the afterlife for what we do now.

"I think there's a karmic effect. I think what you do here matters. It may matter very much and if that's true, then that can shape and shift people's behaviours, for the better hopefully, so there's that kind of dynamic to it. If people are blithely going along in their lives and they're not very kind people – but should they understand the other side exists and that it may matter as to whether you're nice or not as a human being, then maybe you should think about it – just 'who are you?' – and if it has a karmic effect, some kind of an effect, on your existence on the other side, then it sure as heck matters."

### WHAT'S ON THE OTHER SIDE?

The deadline for the competition is August this year, with the winners to be announced in November. What happens after that?

"We'll be thinking about 2022, as to what we can do for that year. Is it going to be another contest? Is it going to be something that is going to involve some of the applicants, some of the people generating these essays? I don't know what to expect in 2022 yet because it's still too early. Maybe a broader contest where we have more prizewinners. We would want to come up with something that certainly wasn't just a repeat. We're interested in ideas as to what could constitute a new kind of contest for 2022."

Bigelow was open-minded about any future direction, speculating about putting up more

LEFT: Raymond Moody, author of the 1975 book *Life After Life*, was the second holder of the Bigelow-endowed Chair of Consciousness Studies at the at University of Nevada.

money, possibly a round million this time, but his eyes were fixed on the present.

"At this moment, our main concern is birthing this programme properly and this contest and paying attention to details and following up, so that this is off to a good start; and then we have to manage it throughout this year to its conclusion. That's our first job: to make sure that we take responsibility for this particular first programme to succeed."

But he volunteered more.

"Proving whether the other side exists or not is actually just the first step. The research community going back to the 1800s has been dominated by the effort to prove its existence, in one way or another, or another, or another... so it has been dominated by the necessity of trying to prove the other side exists and that has gone on for almost two centuries. At some point, I want to move on and go to the next level up, which is probably much more profound than simply whether or not some aspect of your consciousness is going to survive your bodily death."

The next level sounded intriguing. What did he mean by it?

"That level is essentially 'what is the other side all about? If you're going to survive, then you are going to spend 99.999 per cent of your existence, of your spiritual existence, on the other side. It ought to be very important that, at least from the point of view of curiosity, that people would say 'Gee, shouldn't I know a little something, if not a whole lot, if it were possible, about what constitutes the other side?'"

It is the next logical question: if we survive death, then what will it be like? But first the proof.

"We're excited to just see how many contestants there are going to be and who are the winners and all that is going to be really exciting. We'd like to be able to put the winning essays and even some runner-up essays on our website, so that people can see for themselves the quality of each of these arguments that exist. I'm going to be intrigued as to what these essays say."

Those interested in taking a shot at the prize have to apply first. Only applicants who have spent at least five years involved in research into the survival question will be eligible; and then they will have five months to produce not more than 25,000 words presenting the best evidence for a case that many people believe is unprovable.

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# VOICES FROM THE PAGEANT

ERIC HOFFMAN considers the baroque strangeness of James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, a vast postmodernist poem derived from sessions with a Ouija board, and asks whether this baffling and (sometimes literally) batty occult epic was the product of poetic vanity, *folie à deux* or genuine communication with the uncanny inhabitants of the 'Other World'...

SCRIBE: FALL AS DEEPLY INTO OUR  
METAPHORS AS U WILL.  
THE ATOM, IS IT THE VERY GOD WE  
WORSHIP? IS IT  
ONLY AT GREAT RISK PURSUED?  
THE ATOM, IS IT MEANING?  
& IF SO WHAT BUT CHAOS LIES  
BEYOND IT?

"Mirabell: Book 7"

Time is a child playing a board game;  
the kingdom of a child.

James Merrill

Long poems are one of the major forms of modernism. Modernist poets, well aware of the poet's marginalisation after the increase of literacy among the masses, the advent of journalism, and the rise of the novel in the 18th century, often took to the long form as a means to reclaim cultural relevance, and in so doing hearkened back to the Homeric epic. They composed allusive, ambiguous, fragmented works that reflected the disintegration of a unified culture in industrial and post-industrial society, in an attempt to tell, in Ezra Pound's phrase, the "tale of the tribe".

Modernism as a philosophical and literary movement has its origins in the Romantic rejection of Enlightenment positivism and its perceived over-dependence on reason – but, crucially, Modernist poets also rejected Romanticism's reliance on clichés and linguistic archaisms, while they simultaneously evinced scepticism regarding language's transparency in its reflection of extra-linguistic reality. The two definitive long poems of modernism are TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1919) and Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (1915-1962). Modernist-influenced long poems were attempted by the later generation of poets who might best be described as postmodernists; one such is James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1976-1995), a kind of "occult epic", with allusions to culture both high and low, from Dante, Milton, Blake, Hugo, and Yeats,<sup>1</sup> to Madame Blavatsky, JRR Tolkien, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. Unique among long poems,



LEFT: James Merrill (left) and David Jackson photographed in Athens in 1973.

## MERRILL SEEMS AN UNLIKELY PERSON TO DEVELOP AN INTEREST IN THE OCCULT

*Sandover* is co-authored with various "spirits" or "ghostwriters", as they are humourously and self-consciously referred to within the poem. Accompanied by his partner, the fiction writer, composer, and painter David Jackson (1922-2001), Merrill (1926-1995) claimed to have communicated with these spirits during a decades-long series of séances undertaken via the use of a Ouija board, an object of relatively recent popularity.<sup>2</sup>

As an example of modernism, the poem's occult characteristics are not all that unusual. The modernist tradition arguably developed out of Victorian occultism, and religious syncretism profoundly influenced modernism's foundational texts, from Eliot's use of Buddhism and Hinduism in *The Waste Land*, to

Pound's frequent allusions to and translations of Confucianism, Egyptology, and other pre-modern traditions.

What is perhaps most surprising about Merrill's epic, however, is how unanticipated the work was. Prior to the appearance of the initial instalment of the poem, entitled *The Book of Ephraim* (1976), Merrill was primarily regarded as an established and well-recognised lyric poet, who wrote decidedly formal poetry inspired by WH Auden and WB Yeats – indeed, the shades of both poets would be characters in Merrill's epic. Childless and independently wealthy – he was the son of the banker Charles Merrill, founder of Merrill Lynch and of the Safeway grocery chain – Merrill had ample time to indulge in literary pursuits, particularly wordplay: anagrams, spoonerisms, and the invention of new words and phrases. This naturally carried over into his poetry; for example, the *Sandover* of the title is a fictional place; the name "Sandover" is, in fact, a corruption of Saintefleur, or Santofior; its Old English equivalent meaning is "sandy ford". Yet *Sandover*, as implied in the final section of the poem, *Scripts for the Pageant*, might also refer to the Ouija board itself: "PARCHED OBLONG FIELD, 2 OLD ZEN MONKS [a reference to Jackson and the shade of Yeats] RAKING DESIGN AFTER DESIGN, STRUGGLING FOR THE SENSE OF IT". Finally, the name also suggests "sand over", which suggests the secrecy and concealment of an occult text. Indeed, the poem unfolds and behaves much like the sands of the desert: unpredictable, unnavigable, impenetrable.

As a sardonic, ironic, and well-educated upper-class poet who wrote primarily in traditional meters, Merrill seems an unlikely person to develop an interest in the occult. His first encounter with the Ouija board resulted when a friend, writer and theologian Frederick Buechner, bought him a mass-produced board for his 27th birthday as a gag. It was, according to Merrill's biographer Langdon Hammer, "cheap, unpretentious kitsch. It spoke to Jimmy's pleasure in games and word games in particular; and for [Buechner], who





ELISA ROLLE / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: The dining room in the Merrill home in Stonington, Connecticut, where Merrill and Jackson's regular Ouija sessions took place.

was about to enter a Presbyterian seminary, it was a half-joking appeal to his friend's spiritual side."<sup>3</sup>

Initially, Merrill and Jackson (whom Merrill had just recently met) treated the board as an amusing pastime, an after-dinner entertainment conducted in the dining room of their spacious apartment on Water Street in the town of Stonington, Connecticut. They constructed their own board. Using a crayon, they added numbers and letters (and later punctuation to assist in transcription); a teacup was used as a pointer. Other than the employment of candles and mirror, which they were told was a method of seeing in and out of the "Other World", these Ouija sessions were unaccompanied by any occult trappings, but rather were conducted casually, almost as nonchalantly as after-dinner table talk.

The séances proved highly productive. 'Voices from the Other World' (1957), a short poem that introduces the thematic and stylistic features that dominate *Sandover*, was the first to make use of the séance materials. The poem contrasts the idiom of Merrill's spirit communication with moving lyric meditations on his and Jackson's domestic life. By the time Merrill began work on *The Book of Ephraim*, the two had amassed a considerable amount of transcribed communications, a mythology and cosmology Merrill dubbed "the Material."<sup>4</sup> At times, the mythology of *Sandover* comes across like an eccentric compendium of familiar esoteric themes – a syncretic, deeply individualistic hybrid religious belief that possesses characteristics of Egyptology,

Eastern philosophy, Spiritualism, Mesmerism, scientism, and the supernatural. As the communications increased in complexity and perplexity, the diversion became an obsession. Merrill and Jackson's friend, novelist Alison Lurie, notes that as this complexity increased, it consequently became "more deeply disturbing."<sup>5</sup>

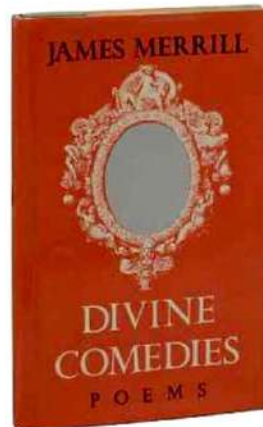
#### THE BOOK OF EPHRAIM

A Greek Jew, Ephraim was "born 8 AD AT XANXOS" – all communications from spirits are fully capitalised in the poem – and "Died / AD 36 ON CAPRI". Ephraim was a favourite of Caligula's, and once occupied the court of Tiberius, the Roman Emperor from AD 14 to 37; Tiberius, in the last years of his life, secluded himself on the island of Capri, where at the island's tip he constructed the Villa Jovis, reportedly the site of considerable debauchery. Strangled to death on the order of the Emperor for his affair with a teenaged Caligula, Ephraim, like Virgil in Dante's *Commedia* before him, serves as spirit guide to Merrill and Jackson. Merrill goes so far as to fold the mythology of Dante's epic into his own (the poem was first published in the 1976 collection *Divine Comedies*). Ephraim, therefore, is Merrill's familiar, much as explorer and author Leo Africanus acts

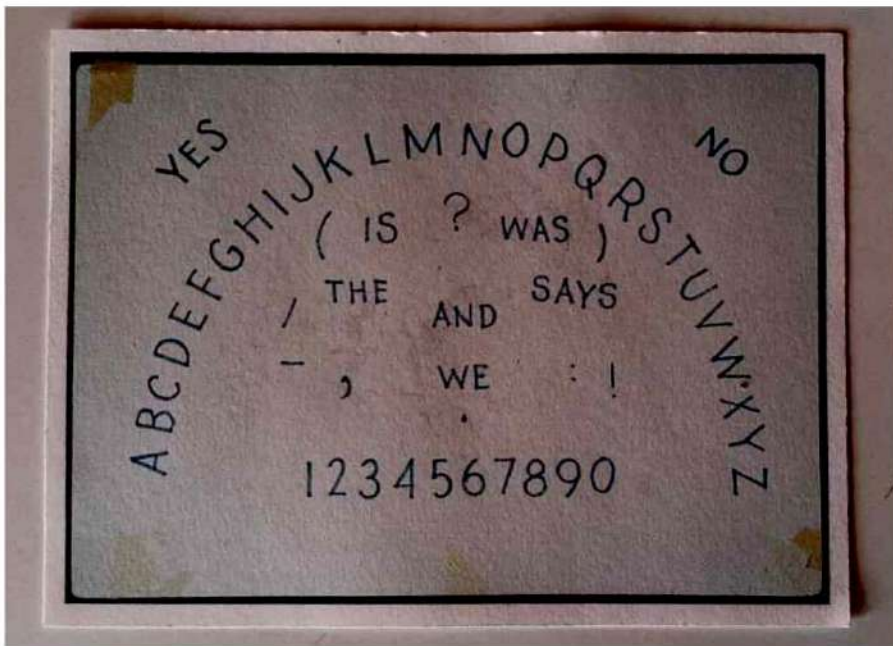
as Yeats's familiar in *A Vision*. Merrill would later compare Ephraim with the "daimon" encountered by Yeats in his automatic writing sessions. The poem that resulted, the 90-page, 3,200-line epyllion (or 'little epic') *The Book of Ephraim*, is a dense, ambitious work in itself, inaugurating a self-constructed mythology and cosmology that eventually came to rival William Blake's *Prophetic Works* in its complexity and eccentricity.

In addition to the Ouija transcripts and their communications with Ephraim, during the poem's composition, Merrill and Jackson undertook extensive trips around the world and visited their many friends in foreign countries. They routinely moved between their apartment in Stonington and their other homes in New York City, Key West and Athens, Greece, where they lived in comfortable anonymity. These travels provided the real-world setting in which their travels into the Other World via the Ouija board took place, and their discussions with other well-to-do sophisticates, artists and intellectuals provided a domestic contrast to their uncanny communications with the spirit realm.

Merrill was eager to transmute the Ouija transcripts into art. Initially, he considered the form of a novel; though he was at this point primarily a lyric poet,







ABOVE LEFT: A facsimile of the original handmade Ouija board used by Merrill and Jackson. The original has been lost. ABOVE RIGHT: The teacup used as a pointer.

he experimented with other genres, and this helped him to refine his talent for plot, characterisation and dialogue, abilities that would prove crucial to his transformation of the raw séance transcripts into a comprehensible, linear narrative, an aspect that distinguishes *The Changing Light at Sandover* from other Modernist and postmodernist long poems.

Yet the novel never materialised as, Merrill claims, Ephraim objected to Merrill's use of the material as fiction, which would require too much alteration of facts. Merrill's first draft of the novel from 1972 was left in a taxi while he visited his mother in Macon, Georgia; he later wondered whether he might have subconsciously left it behind on purpose. He at once set about a rewrite in the fall of 1973, on a return journey from Athens to the United States. While in Frankfurt, that manuscript too mysteriously disappeared. Merrill began to suspect that the same otherworldly beings that had at first warned him against his communications with the spirit realm had attempted to suppress the material – or perhaps were encouraging him to write *Sandover* as a poem. As Merrill admits: "The more I struggled to be plain, the more / Mannerism hobbled me. What for? / Since it never truly fit, why wear / The shoe of prose? In verse the feet went bare."

The form of *Book of Ephraim* would eventually assume is abecedarian: it is divided into 26 sections, each beginning with a letter from the alphabet, the first with 'A' and the last with 'Z', a metonymic device wherein each letter in the alphabet also serves as a key term or motif. This structural device is certainly necessary, as the poem favours associative or thematic as opposed to chronological arrangement. One section, 'Q', consists entirely of quotations from various texts Merrill read at the time of the poem's composition, and this dependence on the alphabet as framework

## MIRABELL CLAIMS TO BE A MOTHMAN-LIKE "HUGE SQUEAKING" CREATURE WITH "HOT RED EYES"

provides Merrill with the opportunity to exercise rhyme, wordplay, and puns. Throughout the poem, Merrill adheres to a strict rhythmic pattern that differentiates human speech from the otherworldly. Human voices are decasyllabic, written in what Merrill describes as a "rough pentameter, our virtual birthright". While both living and dead human beings speak in rhymed couplets and quatrains, the spirits speak in blank verse.

True to mediumistic practices, communication with the spirit realm is best facilitated by a spirit guide. Merrill and Jackson's initial guide, Ephraim, puts them in touch with departed friends and family – yet, curiously, as their interactions with the spirit world increase, they begin to communicate with other spirits without need of an intermediary.

One notable aspect of *The Book of Ephraim* is its use of multiple voices and viewpoints, resulting in a variety of motivations, meanings, and interpretations, undermining any single authoritative view or interpretation. This structure reflects the poem's theology, as voiced by Ephraim, of the transmigration of souls, wherein individual souls move from body to body and where the afterlife is crowded by the constant coming and going of souls from one incarnation to the next. *Ephraim's* major theme, indeed the major

theme of *Sandover* as a whole, is the decline of the old mythologies and the urgent need to replace them with a new mythology – one ultimately intended to save humanity from destruction brought about by atomic warfare or the threat of environmental collapse due to overpopulation. Throughout, Merrill displays an almost Malthusian elitism wherein he decries the "breeders" and their insatiable desire for procreation.

### MIRABELL: BOOKS OF NUMBER

Upon publication, *The Book of Ephraim* alternately provoked shock, consternation, bewilderment, and delight among readers and critics. The literary establishment, however, generally embraced the work; *Divine Comedies* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1977. As the trilogy progressed, it became increasingly elaborate, and incorporated additional, disparate voices, among them Jackson's parents, mutual friend Maria Mitsotaki, and the poet WH Auden, who now enjoyed a passionate love affair with Plato. Auden is not the only poet with whom Merrill and Jackson made contact; others include TS Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and WB Yeats.

Where *The Book of Ephraim* utilised the alphabet, the second volume of Merrill's epic, the 6,500-word *Mirabell: Books of Number* (1978), takes the Arabic numeral portion of the Ouija board for its framework. The poem consists of 10 sections, each of which is additionally subdivided into another 10. As the poem's length increased, so too did its scope: here Merrill began to look to previous epic poems as both resource and guide, most notably Yeats's *A Vision* or Dante's *Commedia*, with which *Sandover* came to share its tripartite structure. Like *Ephraim*, *Mirabell* moves between the cosmic and the mundane; the poem intermixes communications with



the dead and the spirit realm with accounts of Merrill and Jackson's lives in Greece and Stonington.

*Mirabell* is arguably the poem's most didactic section. In it, Ephraim is replaced as a guide by a fallen angel named "Mirabell" who instructs Merrill and Jackson about the nature of the Universe, with the intention that Merrill will eventually be compelled to write "POEMS OF SCIENCE". Mirabell explains that the language of science has been designated to replace a corrupted commonplace one in an effort to bring about an Earthly paradise.

The fallen angels exist at a much higher level than Ephraim; in fact, they are not human, and they are referred to by numbers as opposed to names (Mirabell's is 741). They "SPEAK FROM WITHIN THE ATOM" and represent its negative charge; they are the creators of black holes and pure reason. When asked by Merrill and Jackson to describe himself, Mirabell claims to be a Mothman-like "HUGE SQUEAKING" creature "WITH LITTLE HOT RED EYES" and points to the bats in the pattern of Merrill and Jackson's wallpaper as a close depiction. (Satan and his myriad demonic fallen angels are often depicted in Western art with bat-like wings, as is Lovecraft's Cthulhu.) These bat-creatures, then, lived on Earth in the Arcadian civilisation of Atlantis, at a time long before humans, a period of antigravity and relative weightlessness, and were bred and ruled over by a race of centaurs, which represent the positive force of energy, who act as their messengers.

It's important to note here a more specific context for the era in which the Ouija sessions took place, and the *Sandover* poem was composed. Romanticism – and its American outgrowth Transcendentalism – saw the introduction into Western tradition of the Eastern notion of immanence, that is the perceived

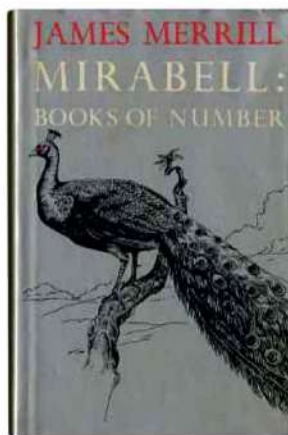
unity of God and Nature, in opposition to the traditional Judeo-Christian view of a remote God of judgment. Victorian Era occultists, in the wake of Darwinism, began to see a correlation between biological and spiritual evolution, a holistic belief in a coterminous relationship between humanity and nature, and therefore between nature and God, that would substantially inform the environmentalist movement. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) contributed to a growing awareness of the environmental impacts of modern industrial society, and gave rise to environmental activism. The period also saw an explosion in the US population, and overpopulation became a concern alongside worries about rapid technological innovation, the expansion of the military industrial complex and substantial increases in nuclear weaponry. American youth culture began to experiment with psychedelics and free love, and to question the established structures of power; this gave rise to anti-war activism and added new energy to the civil and women's rights movements. Within this 1960s counterculture, certain New Age themes – some of which developed out of the same occult, theosophical, and spiritualist activities that led to the Ouija board – took hold, including UFO cults, the Human Potential and Inner Peace movements, and Transcendental Meditation.

Merrill, undoubtedly familiar with counterculture literature, read John Michell's *The Flying Saucer Vision* (1967) and *The View Over Atlantis* (1969). Michell's theory that sacred sites throughout the world are areas wherein earth energies could be harnessed by ancient

spiritual masters in possession of a secret knowledge, since lost, plays a crucial role in the development of *Sandover's* mythology. At the time of the composition of *Mirabell*, Merrill and Jackson visited the Neolithic sites of Avebury and Stonehenge. As Mirabell

maintains, man's ultimate destiny is to reconcile these negative and positive forces of energy. The centaurs tasked the bat creatures with the construction of an atomic bomb, yet eventually, the bat creatures overthrew their centaur overlords – who later evolved into dinosaurs before being destroyed in the bats' atomic conflagration – and established an enlightened civilisation. They constructed floating cities chained to the Earth at 14 specific points ("EACH SET AT SOME

NERVE CENTER OF THE SACRED EARTH PEKING / JERUSALEM AVEBURY THESE ZODIACAL GARDENS / EACH ENDING WITH FLAME OR FLOOD"). Vegetation eventually decayed, and this resulted in the destruction of their society as the floating cities, unmoored, gravitated into the sky to gradually coalesce into what became the Moon, a "tidy reminder" of an ancient, lost civilisation. Subsequently, the bat creatures rebuilt the Arcadian civilisation of Atlantis, which lasted through six different periods or kingdoms, each of which was later destroyed. The bat creatures then compelled Akhenaton to construct a crystal pyramid that would result in the Earth's immolation, yet the plan failed as the crystal had flaws in its manufacture. Mirabell claims that Akhenaton's pyramid "STILL EXERTS AN INFLUENCE



PHOTOS: ERIC HOFFMAN

ABOVE LEFT: Bats on the wallpaper in the Merrill home; the fallen angel Mirabell claims a resemblance to them. ABOVE RIGHT: Peacock on the wall at Stonington.



IN CARIBBEAN WATERS”, which Jackson takes to mean the Bermuda Triangle, and that flying saucers are in fact piloted by an alien race who inscrutably “scout our greenhouse”, stating “BUT CAN U DOUBT THAT WE HAVE VERIFIED THE UFO’S [sic] / ON OUR SCREENS? THESE REFLECT EACH SMALLEST POWER SOURCE. BEING / AS YET SO FOREIGN TO THE DENSITY OF THE WORLD SCIENCE, / THE SAUCERS SHOW UP BEST IN A REALM OF SPECULATION”.

To which Merrill responds: “A mirror world” – Mirabell’s own. When Merrill complains that discussion of UFOs is an insult to his intelligence, Mirabell responds that it is “CURIOUS THAT YOU ACCEPT THE CUP [Merrill and Jackson’s tea cup pointer] & NOT THE SAUCER”. Throughout the poem, a thoroughly nonplussed Merrill cannot resist calling into question Mirabell’s various claims. In so doing, Merrill effectively acts as a stand-in for the reader, who Merrill must have anticipated would remain sceptical, especially given the poem’s strangeness and eccentricity, its mishmash of “MYTH & LEGEND, FACT & LANGUAGE”. When Auden protests that he finds the poem “VERY BEAUTIFUL”, Merrill responds, incredulously:

Dear Wystan, VERY BEAUTIFUL all this  
Warmed-up Milton, Dante, Genesis?  
This great tradition that has come to grief  
In volumes by Blavatsky and Gurdjieff?  
Von and Torro in their Star Trek capes,  
Atlantis, UFOs, God’s chosen apes—?  
Nobody can transfigure junk like that  
Without first turning down the rheostat  
To Allegory, in whose gloom the whole  
Horror of Popthink fastens on the soul,  
Harder to scrape off than bubblegum.

Mirabell also informs his students that, contrary to Ephraim’s claims, the other world’s hierarchy of nine stages is not the centre of the Universe but occupies a region of space that is both lonely and distant. The Universe is in fact ruled by a God of Biology. Auden declares this God to be “NOT / ONLY HISTORY BUT EARTH ITSELF. HE IS THE GREENHOUSE” – again this was the 1970s, when the postwar environmentalist movement became increasingly important. God B is followed in the hierarchy by Nature, which is associated with Chaos, then by the four archangels Michael, Raphael, Emmanuel, and Gabriel.

Mirabell then describes Ephraim’s transmigration of souls, and explains that the main work conducted in Heaven is to produce refined souls – these souls are, oddly enough, manufactured somewhere in outer space in a place referred to as the “Research Lab”. Because of a decided lack of quality material – overpopulation, it seems, has thinned it out – there now exists an overabundance of unrefined incarnate souls. To rectify this overpopulation, the spirits release upon the Earth various natural and manmade disasters. “WE ONLY WISH TO

PURIFY / CERTAIN RANCID ELEMENTS FROM THIS ELITE BUTTER WORLD. / THE HITLERS THE PERONS & FRANCOS THE STALINS... / ... ARE NEEDED”.

Impure souls, refinement through selection, animalistic traits of the rabble, the reduction of the population through mass murder... Gradually it dawned on Merrill and Jackson that the Spirit World’s manipulation of humanity possessed uncomfortable echoes of Malthusianism, eugenics, and racism – what Maria describes as the “INFLEXIBLE ELITISM” of the Other World. Jackson in particular would later acknowledge its genocidal overtones. Mirabell is seemingly unaware of the implications of these sinister machinations, and wonders if in fact the archangels are actually evil. He concludes his lesson with what amounts to a cliffhanger, and informs his students that the Archangel Michael has brought humanity a divine message, namely that man is “A SPECIES OF THE SUN’S MAKING”, whose cells comprise “AN ANCIENT AND IMMORTAL INTELLIGENCE”, namely God.

### SCRIPTS FOR THE PAGEANT

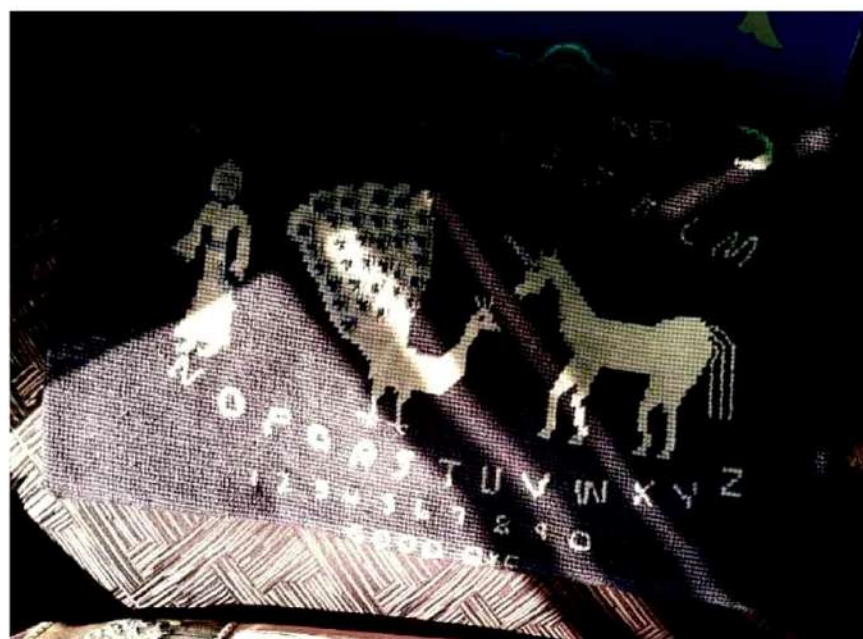
The third and final section of *The Changing Light of Sandover*, *Scripts for the Pageant* (1980), written at Merrill and Jackson’s home in Key West, Florida, is also the longest. As with its predecessors, *Scripts* uses

## THE SPIRIT WORLD’S MANIPULATION OF HUMANITY CONTAINED ECHOES OF EUGENICS

a wide range of poetic styles, while jokes, puns, and wordplay accumulate. Like *Mirabell*, the poem employs a classroom setting. Further up the hierarchal chain of teachers, Mirabell is replaced by the four archangels themselves, who present Merrill and Jackson with 25 lessons on the secrets of the Universe. Unlike Ephraim or Mirabell, however, the angels’ instructions are decidedly eschatological.

As with previous volumes, *Scripts* borrows from the features of the Ouija board for its structure: *Ephraim* is an abecedarian, *Mirabell* depends on numbers, while *Scripts* uses the board’s ‘Yes’ and ‘No’. In this sense, *Scripts* is the most straightforwardly didactic. Merrill here relies on a question-and-answer format, and its four principal characters – Merrill, Jackson, Maria, and Auden – interrogate the archangels. Because the responses must be answered yes or no, they are by design unequivocal. Nevertheless, the complexities of the structure of the Universe mount, and the four angels alternately confirm and correct a number of their previous explanations of its nature. As it turns out, Ephraim and Mirabell, as lower forms, are somewhat unreliable narrators.

The instruction takes the form of a Platonic symposium. Included are the Nine Muses, the four prophets (Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and Mercury), novelist Vladimir Nabokov, and Merrill and Jackson’s close friends, scientist George Cotzias and filmmaker Maya Deren. At one point, WB Yeats takes up occupancy in a lump in Jackson’s hand. Uni, a unicorn-like creature from Atlantis who speaks in an Anglo-Saxon-style alliterative verse, also appears. UFOs are revealed to be the property of angels, “NOT ‘SAUCERS’” but “LIGHT DISCS WHICH HAVE AN INWARD PULL, INSUBSTANTIAL / MICHAEL’S TEASPOONS TESTING THE SOUPY ATMOSPHERE”.



ABOVE: A pillow coverlet in the Merrill home, decorated with representations of a Ouija board, the figure of Ephraim, a peacock and Uni.



## SANDOVER THE VIDEO

In Athens in 1982, Merrill and Jackson permanently retired the Ouija board, took the mirror to the roof of their home and shattered it, then placed the shards into the base of a cassia tree. The following year, Merrill began a love affair with 33-year-old Peter Hooten, an actor who had appeared on numerous television programmes including *The Mod Squad*, *Mannix*, and *The Waltons*, and in the film *The Inglorious Bastards* (1978). Hooten was interested in the production of a cinematic version of Merrill's epic poem, which, with its



play-like structure and cast of characters, appeared well suited to dramatic interpretation. Consequently, Merrill underwrote a video adapta-

tion of *Sandover*, directed by and starring Hooten, to the tune of a reported \$800,000. Silly and pretentious, the video, entitled *Voices from*

LEFT: Merrill as himself and an actor as Jackson in a reconstructed Ouija board session.

*Sandover*, features Merrill as himself, along with a troupe of professional actors (one is a portrayal of Jackson), accompanied by chintzy, 1980s video toaster-quality special effects. Ephraim is depicted as a blonde in a white sheet, while Mirabell chants in reverberating echoes. The angels are depicted as full-screen faces who break the third wall to address the viewer directly, talking in ponderous tones about the mysteries of the Universe. It was by all accounts an unmitigated financial and artistic disaster.

In the face of this bafflingly byzantine cosmology, Merrill can only lament:

It all fits. But the ins and outs deplete us.  
Minding the thread, losing the maze, we curse

Language's misleading apparatus.

*Sandover* concludes with the comparatively brief *Coda: The Higher Keys* (1982) – the title is reminiscent of early 20th century pulp grimoires – which focuses primarily on the rebirth of Robert Morse, one of Merrill and Jackson's Stonington neighbours, as a famous composer. Morse is depicted in *Scripts* as having been taken up into Heaven to move among Merrill's select pantheon of sainted souls: Wilde, Proust, Austen, Colette, Sarah Bernhardt and Pythagoras. *The Higher Keys* ends with Merrill as he prepares to read *Sandover* to the shades of Jane Austen, Dante, and Proust. "...a star trembles in the full carafe / As the desk light comes on, illuminating / The page I open to." In a nod to Joyce's uber-modernist text *Finnegans Wake*, perhaps, Merrill ends the poem with the first word of *Ephraim*, "Admittedly..."

### THE BOARD GAME

The progression from *Ephraim* to *Mirabell* to *Scripts* to the *Higher Keys*, with their increasingly baroque mythology, meant that Merrill's epic came to alienate many of his readers, many of whom appreciated his work most for its deeply conservative poetic values, values that *Sandover* delightfully resisted.

So what are we to make of Merrill's disconcertingly peculiar, and at times frustratingly

dull, epic poem? Was this simply an example of a wealthy couple who cultivated their eccentricities into art? Or did Merrill and Jackson really make contact with otherworldly beings? If they did, what is the veracity of the information they were given?

To address these questions, it is important to consider first the consensus among psychologists and sceptics that if the Ouija board, as with other forms of automatic writing, does not represent actual communication, then it must be the result of manipulation and suggestion. Indeed, for the Ouija board to work, sitters must first anticipate that the pointer will move freely of its own accord and thereby submit to an illusion of autonomous movement, independent of the sitters' manipulations. Such manipulations

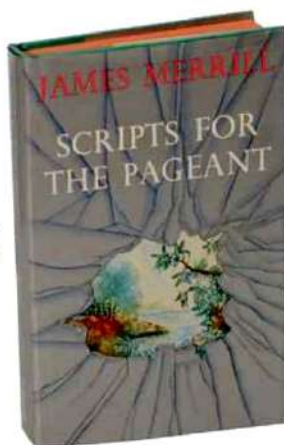
generally consist of either conscious covert manipulation, wherein one of the sitters knowingly moves the pointer in order to deceive the others, or, as is more likely in Merrill and Jackson's experience, unconscious manipulation, wherein sitters make minute adjustments for each other's movements with the result that neither participant is certain whose movement actually occurred – a process suggesting that an additional, invisible, autonomous presence is somehow involved in the movement of the pointer.

Some critics see the fiction writer Jackson's hand – no pun intended – in these 'spirit' communications, a perhaps unconscious attempt on his part to manipulate the credulous Merrill. Critics have noted a number of similarities and parallels in the literary style of these voices and in Jackson's

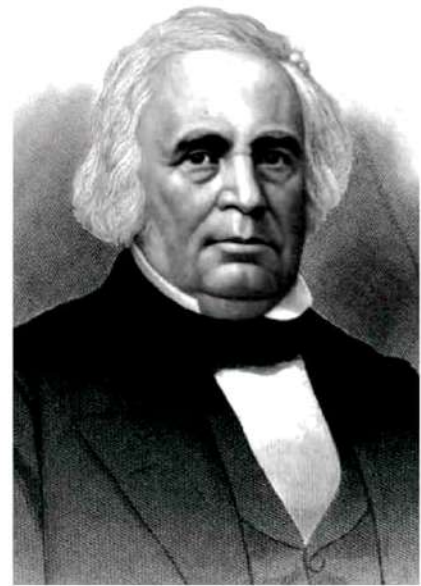
writings, yet it is difficult to parse Jackson's intentions or to conclude with any certainty whether his actions were ultimately malicious. Alison Lurie speculates, admittedly without any evidence, that "while Jimmy was busy writing the messages down, David was gently but firmly pushing the teacup."<sup>6</sup> She suspects that David was "the essential sitter" in that he was "more skeptical about the external reality of the spirits, but he was also more afraid of them. And he was also more attuned to their existence. Jimmy used to maintain, only partly in jest, that David had ESP..." Merrill, Lurie continues, "was also far more suggestible psychologically"; he could easily undergo hypnosis or be put into a trance.<sup>7</sup>

Still another possibility is that one of Merrill's reasons for taking part in the Ouija sessions was to give Jackson, a frustrated novelist, a literary outlet. In an interview conducted in 1981, Merrill readily admits that "David is the subconscious shaper of the message itself, the 'Hand' as they [the spirits of the "Other World"] call him... The transcripts as they stand could never have come into being without him. I wonder if the trilogy should not have been signed with both our names – or simply, 'by Jackson, as told to Merrill?'" "The poem isn't mine", Merrill once confessed to a friend.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, contrary to Lurie's assertions of Jackson's scepticism as opposed to Merrill's credulity, it was Jackson who experienced several supernatural occurrences, among them a vision of Ephraim's reflection in a mirror. He also allegedly witnessed a demon hovering outside their living room window, three floors up. These events gave him cause to be, in Lurie's description, "more afraid" of the spirits. Moreover, Merrill would continually question whether Ephraim, Mirabell, and the other supernatural denizens with whom he and





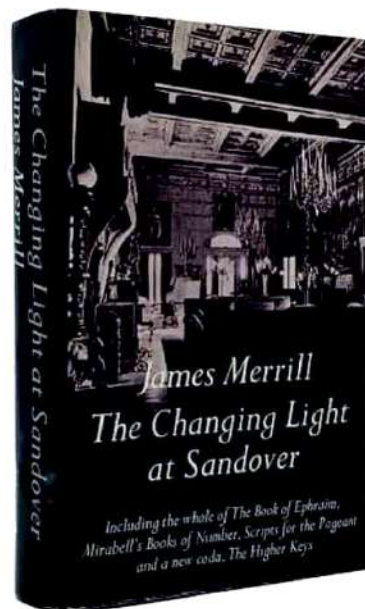


ABOVE LEFT: Merrill and Jackson spent 40 years acting as 'messengers' for the denizens of the spirit world. ABOVE RIGHT: Ephraim Williams, buried in Old Stonington Cemetery. BELOW: The whole 560-page Sandover epic was collected in *The Changing Light at Sandover* in 1982.

Jackson claimed to have communicated were in fact objective beings or simply the fanciful construct of his and David Jackson's imagination, a *folie à deux* – as suggested to Merrill by his psychiatrist – or perhaps an experiential emanation, a kind of Jungian archetype of sorts, a physical manifestation of unconscious desires and energies. Despite this, Merrill's scepticism wavered considerably. Lurie confessed that she "sometimes had the feeling that my friend's mind was intermittently being taken over by a stupid and possibly even alien intelligence."<sup>9</sup>

Despite repeated warnings at first to break off communication with the spirit realm, the couple persisted. These collaborative sessions provided Merrill and Jackson with an important bond long after their physical and artistic relationship began to deteriorate. By the time they made contact with Ephraim, their relationship was already considerably strained. The Ouija sessions, therefore, were simultaneously an escape from the doldrums of their daily lives and an affirmation of what they perceived to be their inherent exceptionalism as artists. As Lurie observed, Ephraim spoke to their essential vanity; in the spirit world "they were superior, enlightened beings... at the centre of a web of connections to lost friends and former selves past and present... And in the spirit world, they would be forever young and beautiful."<sup>10</sup> In a letter, Merrill writes of the seductive, dreamlike pull of the Ouija board and their communication with the spirits of the Other World: "These voices are essentially human – hence fallible – prejudiced, even as we. Very often they do not recall the past accurately, and are unable to predict the future except in very abstract ways. To be guided by it is surely dangerous. What it has given me is simply proof of a world I had not hitherto believed in – like the proof of the exis-

## "IT HAS GIVEN ME PROOF OF A WORLD I HAD NOT HITHERTO BELIEVED IN"



tence of God. Upon such proofs one must build one's own systems, or go to priests or philosophers for guidance. Yeats quotes an ancient utterance attributed to Orpheus: 'Do not open the gates of Pluto, for within is a people of dreams'".<sup>11</sup>

Upon completion of *Ephraim*, Merrill contemplated putting the Ouija board away permanently, yet the fact remained that he and Jackson still enjoyed their nightly

séances; as Merrill admitted, they were "never to forego, in favor of / Plain dull proof, the marvelous nightly pudding". Their use of the Ouija board, which lasted some 40 years, provided them with more than simply the material; it was a source of entertainment, excitement, and, of course, literary inspiration. Indeed, Merrill took considerable liberties with the "material" when he fashioned it into a poetic form, and often rewrote the transcripts in order to clarify, heighten the language, or fit the epic's prosody or thematic structure. The spirits were inconsistent, unclear, incoherent, contradictory, and often used a kind of occult shorthand. Merrill had to rearrange, cut, change spellings, and reword so that he could locate the repeating themes and images with which to piece together a coherent story. These were not verbatim transcripts, like the "materials"; Merrill in no way felt obliged to maintain anything like absolute fidelity to the spirits' communications. He frequently took significant liberties, even going so far as to invent and assign dialogue to spirits not present in the transcripts.

Moreover, Merrill's expansion, ostensibly at the spirits' behest, of *Sandover's* mythology into "POEMS OF SCIENCE", the introduction of a God of Biology, and the passages that detailed the spirits' genetic manipulation of humanity, followed his studies in biology and genetics. Lurie wonders if the pseudo-scientific material conveyed by the spirits was easier for Merrill to accept given his relative ignorance of the natural sciences and an absence of "strong religious or personal commitments". She goes on to say that "Any imaginary world, of course, tends to bear traces of the world its inventors already know, and to incorporate their life experiences, memories, and dreams, their ideas about science, morality, and the arts. The resulting construct will





ABOVE: Jackson and Merrill's graves in Old Stonington Cemetery.

inevitably reflect its creators' knowledge, opinions, and tastes, both conscious and unconscious."<sup>12</sup>

On this point, Ephraim, notably, shares a number of biographical similarities with Merrill. Both he and Ephraim came from a broken home. Ephraim's father, like Merrill's, had a career in finance. Like Tiberius, Charles Merrill could go to tyrannical extremes; at one point, he threatened to have his son's first lover murdered. To give Merrill the benefit of the doubt, however, one might suggest that it is these shared traits that drew Ephraim and Merrill together in the first place. As his biographer, Langdon Hammer, notes, the name Ephraim, which means "double fruitfulness" in Hebrew, also appears in Stonington, Connecticut, history: the name of Ephraim Williams, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Stonington resident, is carved into the gate of the Old Stonington Cemetery, and his tomb is visible to anyone who enters.

Merrill and Jackson's Ouija board sessions also carry with them an obvious wish-fulfilment. Communications from the dead are generally messages meant to reassure the living that their departed family and friends comfortably enjoy the afterlife, that they have managed to reconcile any regret or guilt accumulated during their lives and achieved peace. For example, in the afterlife, Merrill and Jackson's parents are no longer uncomfortable with their homosexuality. In fact, male homosexuality, far from being the shunned and taboo subculture that it was on 1970s Earth, is in the Other World a superior condition, with homosexual men largely in control of the Universe. Maria, the only female in the main quartet, is later revealed to have been a male in a past life who decided to be reincarnated in a female body. Heterosexual "breeders" are the cause of the overpopulation and ecological disaster that threatens the fate of humanity. Population reduction is an important first step to humanity's salva-

tion – as Mirabell proclaims: "AN INTELLIGENT RACE ONE 100<sup>TH</sup> THE SIZE / OF EARTH'S POPULATION WOULD RAISE YR PYRAMID ANEW" – and homosexual men must therefore work to bring it about. Unable to procreate in physical form, in the spirit realm they are in fact in charge of the transmigration of souls, and determine who is reborn and who is recycled. As Hammer observes, the elevation of male homosexuals to such lofty positions in the Other World may be the result of "the compensatory elitism of the poet and the cultured intellectual in a society which values neither one very highly. It's also the snobbery of a gay man trying to convert a style of life commonly seen as sinful, self-centred, or simply alien, into a sign of spiritual superiority."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, it is explained to Merrill and Jackson that in the spirit world poets have an integral role, as they are tasked with "DEVELOP[ING] THE WAY TO PARADISE". That poets are accorded such a special responsibility is perhaps not at all surprising, given Merrill's occupation, and it neatly explains why the spirit world sought out communication with him in the first place.

Toward the end of their lives both Merrill and Jackson, reflecting on their 40-year project, commented on the veracity of the communications with the spirit realm and their roles as students and 'messengers' enlisted to record and disseminate the information provided to them by their otherworldly contacts. Jackson's statement in a late and revealing interview is one of mystification and ultimately of regret: "I remember thinking, if this is us doing it, what a hideous kind of schizophrenia as it were, with time just disappearing... And the idea that I'd spend those hours at a Ouija board seemed to me obscene; what a way to spend time, you know. That was before we got on to the Lessons, when it seemed that we were summoned to something. And then

another feeling took over, the feeling of it being very, very egocentric, the idea that we were supposed to be taking and delivering these great messages. That seemed to me really bizarre and vain and bogus. It was the hardest thing to take... It immediately stopped being somewhat enjoyable and just became a big chore, one that didn't end till the Epilogue."<sup>14</sup> When asked by critic Helen Vendler in an interview, "How real does it all seem to you?" Merrill responded, with typical aplomb: "Literally, not very – except in recurrent euphoric hours when it's altogether too beautiful not to be true."<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

**1** Victor Hugo and WB Yeats were writers who, like Merrill, were interested in the occult; Hugo took part in table-tapping while Yeats studied mysticism, astrology, Spiritualism and the occult extensively, was a member of the paranormal research society "The Ghost Club", Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, helped to found the Dublin Hermetic Order, and experimented with automatic writing in the form of spirit dictation taken by his wife Georgie Hyde-Lees and published as *A Vision* (1925).

**2** Though various implements for communicating with the dead have existed since ancient Egypt and Greece, the Ouija board is a relatively recent invention. In the mid-19th century, mediums used a device called a "planchette", a heart-shaped board resting on wheels, and holding a pencil. As the planchette moved, it would at times produce words of varying degrees of legibility. William Fuld, a businessman, came up with a new design meant for mass production: a heart-shaped pointer that would move across a board decorated with the alphabet, an ampersand symbol, the numbers 1-10, and a yes and no. He named this board "Ouija", which meant to suggest something vaguely exotic, Near Eastern, and Arabic, but which, in fact, is merely the combination of the French and German words for "yes" (*oui* and *ja*). Ouija boards were introduced commercially in 1902, yet they did not receive popular recognition until the occult revival of the 1920s, when family members began actively seeking out methods of contacting those who died or went missing during the First World War. For more on the history of the Ouija board, see **FT249:30-37, 318:14-15, 269:48-49**.

**3** Langdon Hammer, *James Merrill: Life and Art*, New York: Knopf, 2015, p.49.

**4** The entirety of the transcriptions of the Ouija sessions has been digitized and is now available for perusal by the public on the James Merrill Digital Archive: <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/jamesmerrillarchive/ouijatranscripts>.

**5** Alison Lurie, *Familiar Spirits*, New York, Penguin Books, 2000, p.77.

**6** Lurie, pp.90-91.

**7** *Ibid.*, pp.92-93.

**8** Lurie, pp.135-36; Hammer, p.585.

**9** Lurie, p.63.

**10** *Ibid.*, p.103.

**11** Quoted in Hammer, p.200.

**12** Lurie, pp.84-85.

**13** Hammer, p.596.

**14** Quoted in Lurie, pp.117-118.

**15** Quoted in Hammer, p.612.

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# THE RUSKINGTON GOBLIN

For the next instalment in his continuing examination of high strangeness in Lincolnshire, **ROB GANDY** takes to the county's roads once more to share a brief but brand-new entry in the saga of the Ruskington Horror...

One of the good things about highlighting for-  
tean phenomena in the media is that you can sometimes get new people coming forward and volunteering their own inexplicable experiences, which they have put to the back of their mind or only discussed with close friends and family, if anyone. The publication of my two articles about *The Ruskington Horror* (FT401:32-38, 402:38-43) resulted in me being interviewed by BBC Radio Lincolnshire and Howard Hughes on talkRADIO. Therefore, it was no great surprise when I was contacted with another story from the Ruskington area. However, I was very surprised by the story itself...

Around 9pm on 10 September 2017 Marc was driving alone down the A15; he was heading home to Bourne, having been in Lincoln earlier in the day. He was about 30 minutes into his journey cruising at 55 miles per hour (88 km/h) in his Mazda 3, in a steady flow of traffic, listening to music on the radio. It was when he was just north of Leasingham, between the Cranfield turn-off and the first turn-off to Leasingham, and a little less than two miles (3.2km) from the Holdingham roundabout (see map), that something very peculiar happened. At a spot where the white lines edging the road on both sides were broken to indicate tracks into the farmers' fields to the left and right, Marc was amazed to catch sight in his headlights of what he can only describe as "a kind of goblin" – a thin little man, probably less than a foot (13cm) tall, running along on the inside of the road to his left in the same direction he was travelling. Admittedly, this all happened in a split second, but it was sufficiently strange for Marc to download the relevant footage from his dash cam when he got home. Unfortunately, the images were typically unclear and inconclusive, despite the weather having been fine. Some small markings could be made out on the road, but nothing that resembled the 'goblin' that he remembered so vividly. In the circumstances,



LEFT: The exact location of Marc's encounter on the A15 near Leasingham.

## IN HIS HEADLIGHTS WAS A THIN LITTLE MAN, PROBABLY LESS THAN A FOOT TALL



he rationalised that it was probably just a rabbit or hare (which was not obvious from the dash cam, but it is important to bear in mind that dash cams have very wide-angle lenses and so can distort the field of view to a great extent). Despite the fact that he was familiar with observing such wildlife at the side of the road in rural Lincolnshire, Marc struggled to shake off his perception that the

gait and appearance of what he had seen strongly resembled some kind of homunculus, and that he felt that it was slightly malevolent. Therefore, he had to put it down to being a trick of the light or "one of those things".

There the story might have ended – filed away in Marc's memory, possibly to be later forgotten. But Marc subscribes to *Fortean Times* and had read my articles about *The Ruskington Horror* – and he realised that the place where he saw the 'goblin' was right in the middle of the area I described, where many of the strange events described by other witnesses on the A15 had taken place. Understandably, this caused him to revisit the spot and re-evaluate what had happened. Certainly, if an actual goblin (or other weird creature) had clearly appeared on the dash cam then he would have been straight on to *FT* at the time. He is familiar with Charles Bonnet Syndrome (see FT125:14, 184:46-49, 321:54-55), and how stimuli can cause the brain to over-interpret what is actually being seen; and he appreciates that somehow he might have "filled in detail" and turned whatever he witnessed into a running 'goblin'. Nevertheless, he feels certain that it wasn't something static because, as far as he was concerned, it was definitely moving; not just in a translational sense, but with its arms and legs relative to its body. Which neatly brings us back to Shirley Wallace's question about whether a traveller's state of mind creates hallucinations or enables the perception of external paranormal phenomena that are already present. Perhaps for Marc it was the latter...

❖ **ROB GANDY** is a Visiting Professor at Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University and a regular contributor to *FT*. A lifelong fortean, he has eclectic interests in all things weird, including phantom hitchhikers, ghosts, strange sports and folk customs, time slips and synchronicities.



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## THE BODY POLITIC

In the second of three articles about unusual Latin American leaders, **SD TUCKER** bows down before the miraculous wandering corpse of the one-time ruler of Ecuador, a man so righteous his true kingdom was not really of this Earth – which was why someone shot him...

Last month we recalled a speech given by the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, in which he talked of the centrality of the all-powerful military dictator, or *caudillo*, to the life and legend of his home continent. To illustrate his point, he mentioned three of the strangest such rulers on record, whose lives we have been reviewing here. Márquez's second autocrat was the writer's near-namesake General Gabriel García Moreno (1821-1875), a man who, said Márquez, "ruled Ecuador for 16 years as an absolute monarch; at his wake, the corpse was seated on the Presidential chair, decked out in full-dress uniform and a protective layer of medals."<sup>1</sup> What had Moreno done to deserve such a macabre send-off?

### DIARY OF A NOBODY

Unlike most *caudillos*, General Moreno was very much on the side of the angels. After his death at the hands of an assassin in 1875, Moreno was found to have been keeping a copy of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* in his pocket, at the back of which had been laid out in list-form the President's rather extreme and ascetic rules for living a good and useful life in the eyes of the Lord. Among the ways in which the deeply self-abnegating Moreno sought to imitate Christ's character and eliminate all other aspects of his own natural temperament were the following: "Every morning when saying my prayers I will ask especially for humility... Every hour I will say to myself, 'I am worse than a demon and Hell should be my dwelling-place'... In my room, never to pray sitting when I can do so on my knees or standing... Practise daily little acts of humility, such as kissing the ground... To rejoice when I or my actions are censured. Never to speak of myself except to show my faults or defects... To make efforts, by thinking of Jesus and Mary, to... go against my natural inclination ... To be kind to all... and never to speak ill of my enemies... [To] give myself only to useful and necessary business, and to continue it with zeal and perseverance... and have no intentions in all my actions save the greater glory of God... I will never pass more than an hour in any amusement, and in general never before 8 o'clock in the evening."<sup>2</sup>

While most weak-willed moderns, even



those who share Moreno's profound Catholic faith, might find all this a little too severe, it is hard to deny that the broad aims listed in Moreno's personal note to himself were admirable. So eager was he to bear the cross of suffering for his people that in 1873 he actually paraded through the streets of Ecuador bearing a huge cross on his back, in yet another attempt at *Imitatio Christi*.<sup>3</sup>

### WITH GOD ON HIS SIDE

An obscure figure today outside of his homeland, Gabriel García Moreno ranks as one of the founding fathers of the Ecuadorean nation. President from 1861 to 65 and 1869 to 1875, he had just won another term in office prior to being killed – something his many enemies could not stand. To some, he was a hero, donating his salary to the poor; to others, he was a cruel military dictator who repressed the rights of minorities. The dividing-line in your attitude towards Moreno came down to one thing: your parallel attitude towards Catholicism.

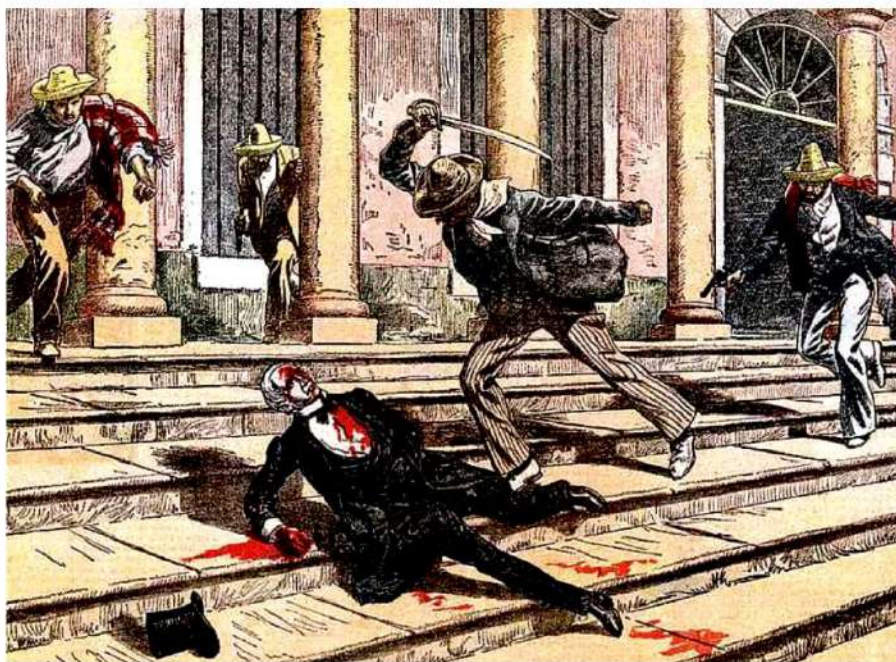
Raised by a devotedly Catholic mother, Moreno had once studied theology with an idea of entering the priesthood. However, after becoming an adult he abandoned this plan and temporarily left Ecuador, fleeing

LEFT: General Gabriel García Moreno. FACING PAGE TOP: The bloody assassination of President Moreno. FACING PAGE BOTTOM: Soldiers surround Moreno's body.

its anti-clerical, Liberal-type government and spending time in France, hoping there to study modern science and methods of governance and the effects of rising secularism upon the European psyche. Finding much to admire in Europeans' higher standards of living and learning, Moreno was in other ways unimpressed by what he saw as a godless and dying civilisation.

After returning home, he joined the opposition Conservative-type party, taking on military rank and command in the forthcoming civil war of 1859/60. Installed as President in 1861, Moreno set about taming the chaos the country had descended into, building much-needed infrastructure, expanding primary education and restoring law and order. By waging war on corruption, and sacking as many useless bureaucrats as possible, he even managed to achieve the fiscal holy grail of building up the national coffers while simultaneously reducing taxation. So why would anyone want to kill him? For one thing, all those corrupt officials who had been sacked had an obvious grudge. For another, there was Moreno's desire to avoid the slow cultural suicide of Europe by lessening the separation between Church and State established by previous Liberal governments. Wishing to create an ultra-Catholic utopia, the new Constitution he introduced in 1869 made Catholicism the only legally recognised religion in Ecuador, and required that both candidates and voters be themselves Catholics in order to participate in subsequent elections, thus effectively ruling out any future Liberal governments forever. As a further repressive measure, secret societies, especially the Freemasons, were banned. This latter edict led to rumours that a global conspiracy of Masons was now out to get Moreno. In reality, many people of a secular, socialist or liberal bent wanted him dead, but the Freemasons were the local bogeymen of the day, and when he was finally killed it was they who got the blame. While the majority of Ecuadoreans, particularly the poor, supported Moreno and his anti-leftist secret





police, his critics accused him, like Milton, of being very much of the Devil's party without knowing it. "Liberty for everyone and for everything, save for evil and evil-doers" was his mantra; but what if General Moreno's definition of what constituted 'evil' was simply a synonym for 'non-Catholic'? <sup>4</sup>

## ANATOMY OF A MURDER

Having already survived six failed attempts on his life, the General was finally murdered by his enemies on 6 August 1875. Moreno's day in the capital, Quito, began normally enough, with him receiving Communion at 6am Mass as always, then returning home to draft a speech. At 1pm he left on foot for the Presidential Palace, stopping as he climbed its steps to greet one Faustino Rayo, a leatherworker. Rayo had once been dismissed from office by Moreno for corruption, but, typically, the President had later sought to support his more honest endeavours by lending him his custom. Rayo showed little gratitude, however, and rushed forward, slicing at Moreno's head with a machete. Missing, Rayo managed merely to knock Moreno's top-hat off, but other conspirators on the scene shot at the General with pistols. The bullets only grazed Moreno, before Rayo severed his left arm and right hand with another machete-slice. "Die, tyrant!" Rayo shouted. "Die, Jesuit!" yelled another murderer. Moreno, expecting to be killed soon anyway, had a noble response prepared for any such insult. "God does not die," he spluttered, through the haze of blood. "I am only a man who can be killed and replaced, but God does not die!" With that, Moreno staggered forwards and fell off the raised platform of the presidential palace where he had been assaulted, falling

## HE INTENDED TO PARADE THE LEG BEFORE CROWDS OF ONLOOKERS

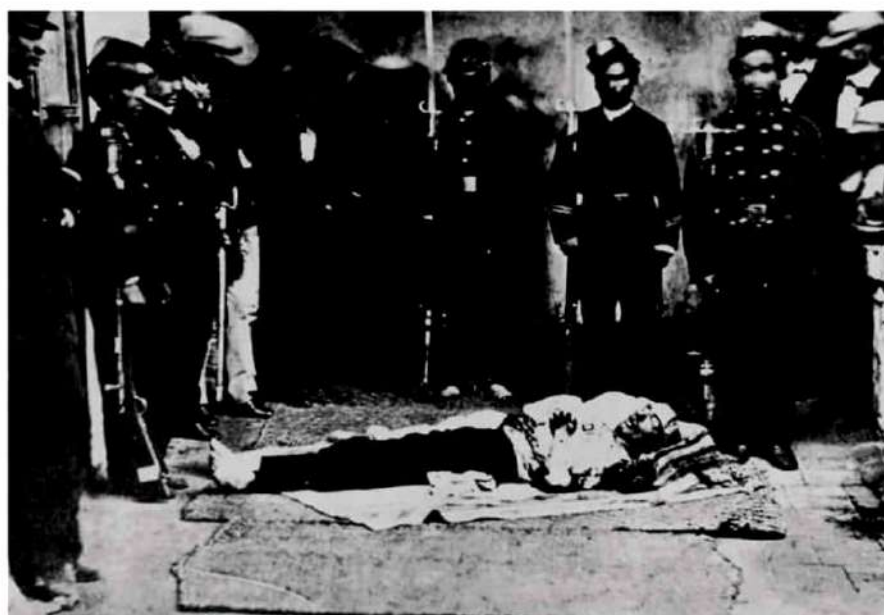
12 feet to his doom as Rayo rushed down after him and rained down yet more blows, severing part of his skull. Amazingly, Moreno still wasn't quite dead. A nearby soldier shot and killed Rayo, with an angry mob then dragging his corpse through the streets and

dumping it in a cesspool. Moreno himself was taken to Quito's cathedral, where a priest administered the last rites. Asked whether or not he forgave his killers, Moreno indicated that he did, and then promptly died, thus living up to his secret promise to "be kind to all... and never speak ill of my enemies".

The assassins had hoped that Moreno's murder would lead to a Liberal revolution, but the bulk of Ecuadoreans loved their pious and incorruptible leader, and a period of general mourning set in. Those who came to pay tribute to their dead *caudillo's* body prior to its burial, however, would have been startled to see a surprise guest sitting there in his chair and monitoring proceedings – General Moreno himself. Instead of simply lying him inside a coffin, officials had decided to dress the patched-up corpse in full military uniform, complete with plumed hat and medals, before perching him on public display in a chair in the cathedral's courtyard; he was protected by an honour guard of five soldiers, who were on hand to make sure no one ran off with a little bit of the president as a souvenir. However, *rigor mortis* had evidently set in by this point, as photos of the scene clearly show a stiff-looking figure with a creepy, toothless rictus-grin on his face; he could more accurately be described as being propped up against the chair like a plank of wood rather than seated in it. In this way, Moreno remained as upright in death as he had been in life. That Sunday, he was deservedly laid to rest within the cathedral itself. <sup>5</sup>

## CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD

The fact that Moreno expected to be killed one day is no surprise, given the six prior attempts upon his life. Immediately after being re-elected in 1875, he wrote a letter to Pope Pius IX, asking his blessing on account







of the rumour that: "Now the Masonic Lodges of the neighbouring countries, instigated by Germany, are vomiting against me all sorts of atrocious insults and horrible calumnies, now that the Lodges are secretly arranging for my assassination, I have more need than ever of divine protection so that I may live and die in defence of our holy religion and the beloved republic I am called once more to rule."

Furthermore, on 5 August, the day before his assassination, a Catholic priest had begged his way into Moreno's office to warn him of the plot, but Moreno's only response had been to say that, if this was so, he had better "prepare myself to appear before God".<sup>6</sup> Maybe he actually *wished* to be martyred and thus to suffer in a greater cause, like his beloved Christ. Another reason for Moreno's sense of fatalism about the matter, however, may have derived from a more unexpected source – the mouth of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) herself.

In the church attached to the Conceptionist Convent of nuns in Quito stands a crowned statue of the BVM, holding both a crosier and the infant Christ. The legend told about the origins of this statue is strange indeed. In 1607 two Spanish friars travelled to Rome, seeking Papal approval

for a new Holy Order they wished to form, bringing with them a statue of the Virgin which they claimed had saved them on their journey. Passing through Catalonia, the friars had met with a storm so relentless they thought they would die in it, and prayed to Mary for shelter. A light then appeared in the nearby mountains. It led to a holy cave, made of polished stone and fragrant with invisible blooms. Inside stood a mysterious statue of the BVM, just like the one now in Quito, surrounded by shimmering heavenly radiance. Taking the icon with them, the monks told their tale to Pope Paul V, who granted them the right to found their new Order, placing it under the protection of the statue, which he named 'Our Lady of Good Success'. The effigy, afterwards displayed within the Royal Hospital of Madrid, became famous for the various miracle cures it supposedly performed. Devotion to the magic statue spread abroad with the expansion of Spain's New World Empire, including to a group of nuns based in the Quito convent.

One of these nuns, Sister Mariana de Jesús Torres (1563-1635), a stigmatic whose apparently incorrupt body still lies beneath glass in the convent's church, had numerous visions of religious figures, and is said

to have died and resurrected – or fallen insensible in a trance-state – several times. Mariana's first death came in 1582, when she was called before God's Judgement Seat and given the choice of remaining in Heaven or returning to Earth to suffer in expiation for the future sins of the 20th century. She chose the latter, having been shown a vision of lapsed modernity that proved most shocking to her sensibilities. She had been having visions of the BVM since the day of her first communion, aged nine, and the two had kept in touch ever since.

One thing the BVM told Mariana out in Quito was that she should have a statue made of her after the model of the original 'Good Success' figure found in the Spanish cave, an instruction Mariana followed. However, the chosen artist did not finish his sculpture, the story goes, as at 3am on 16 January 1611, Mariana approached the choir loft where the incomplete statue was kept, seeing it ablaze with angelic light. Then, she saw the Archangels Michael, Raphael and Gabriel appear, together with St Francis of Assisi. They helpfully gave the statue its finishing touches, whereupon it miraculously came to life as the BVM's spirit descended into it, singing.<sup>7</sup>



ABOVE LEFT: The statue of Our Lady of Good Success in the Conceptionist Church, Quito. ABOVE RIGHT: President Moreno's patched-up corpse on public display in the courtyard of Quito's cathedral. FACING PAGE: Moreno's rediscovered skeleton photographed in 1975, complete with jaunty velvet cap.



## KEEP THAT BODY MOVING

Presumably we are dealing with embellished accounts of visionary phenomena here, but, if so, then some of Sister Mariana's visions seemed to have direct relevance to the life – and death – of General Moreno. Besides warning about the central role Freemasonry would one day play in the decline of global Catholicism, on 16 January 1599 the BVM is said to have again appeared to Mariana and uttered another prophecy: "In the 19th century, there will be a truly Catholic President [in Ecuador], a man of character, whom God, Our Lord, will give the palm of martyrdom on the square adjoining this convent. He will consecrate this Republic to the Sacred Heart of my Most Holy Son, and this consecration will sustain the Catholic Religion in the years that will follow, which will be ill-fated ones for the Church."<sup>8</sup>

Seeing that this appears to be a fully accurate prediction of the coming presidency of General Moreno (who consecrated Ecuador to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1873), we are left with two options; either this was a genuinely miraculous revelation, or some kind of legend which grew up following Moreno's assassination in order to steer his Catholic supporters through hard times.<sup>9</sup>

That these *were* hard times for Ecuador's Catholics is proven by the fact that, fearing his bones would be desecrated by subsequent anti-clerical governments following his death, in 1883 General Moreno's body was secretly stolen from its grave in Quito's cathedral and hidden away in an unknown spot by his family. It remained lost until, with the centenary of his death approaching in 1975, the Ecuadorean Conservative Party set in motion a search for his bones. One Dr Francisco Salazar was given the task of hunting for the corpse, having his first success on 8 April when he found a crystal flask containing Moreno's preserved heart sealed within a hollow column inside a convent church. Even better, on 14 April Dr Salazar rediscovered Moreno's complete skeleton, buried beneath floorboards within another convent church, inside a wooden coffin whose lid bore the initials 'GGM' in yellow nails. Moreno's skin had long rotted away, but the velvet cap he was wearing had not, giving his recovered skull a strangely jaunty look. Beneath the cap lay a hole, showing where Rayo's machete had done its unholy work. The displaced skull-fragment had been kept for posterity and, upon fetching it, Salazar found it fitted perfectly. The Cinderella-like jigsaw was complete and, on 6 August 1975, 100 years to the day after his brutal murder, Moreno's remains were re-interred within Quito's cathedral, his wandering bones rehabilitated at last.<sup>10</sup>

In truth, Moreno's countrymen had never really forsaken him. Although he has



not actually been beatified as a saint by the Vatican, the peasant folk of Ecuador continued praying to his soul for decades after his death, with a number of miracles attributed to his direct intervention. Travellers would pray to him as their patron before setting out on dangerous journeys, and the sick claim he has cured them of many ailments. His ghost has also been said to have performed magic tricks, such as making a burnt batch of bread miraculously turn perfectly golden within an oven, and providing people in dire financial need with untraceable cheques from beyond the grave. He is even alleged to have caused poltergeist phenomena, as when a group of housebreakers were chased off one night by "a tremendous crash, like... the collapse of the house", together with a portrait of Moreno flying around and re-hanging itself in another place of its own accord. Crime-fighting was another speciality of Moreno's spirit; his apparition is supposed to have popped up and informed victims which particular miscreants had stolen their goods.<sup>11</sup>

As for his legacy today, the General would doubtless be delighted to hear that Ecuador's current national leader bears the proud surname of Moreno, too. He might be less pleased to discover that his first name is Lenin.<sup>12</sup>

**NEXT TIME – 'Better Red Than Dead'.** Meet the third of Gabriel García Márquez's surreal and sinister *caudillos*; the insane, ant-loving Theosophist of El Salvador who turned his homeland red with blood – and cellophane.

## NOTES

The main sources for this article and its quotes were Lady Mary Monica Maxwell-Scott, *Gabriel García Moreno: Regenerator of Ecuador*, R & T Washburne, 1914 & Fr Augustine Berthe, *García Moreno, President of Ecuador*, Burns & Oates, 1889. I have also provided more convenient online sources for this same information, though some should be treated with caution. Virtually every account of Moreno's life available in English is essentially a hagiography, with most contemporary promotion of his cult (and that of Our Lady of Good Success) being performed by *Young Pope*-like ultra-Catholics of a deeply conservative bent, who enjoy depicting modernity as a Freemason-riddled Hell-pit from which only a return to the values of men like Moreno can save us.

<sup>1</sup> Speech online at [www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture.html)

<sup>2</sup> Moreno's full list is available in several places online; for example, [www.traditioninaction.org/bkreviews/A\\_022br\\_GarciaMoreno.htm](http://www.traditioninaction.org/bkreviews/A_022br_GarciaMoreno.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Maxwell-Scott, 1914, p.127

<sup>4</sup> Apart from the books of Lady Maxwell-Scott and Fr Berthe, the following provide good short accounts of Moreno's period of rule, again mostly with a positive, pro-Catholic spin; [www.ourladyofgoodsuccess.com/pages/biography-of-gabriel-garcia-moreno](http://www.ourladyofgoodsuccess.com/pages/biography-of-gabriel-garcia-moreno); [www.traditioninaction.org/bkreviews/A\\_022br\\_GarciaMoreno.htm](http://www.traditioninaction.org/bkreviews/A_022br_GarciaMoreno.htm); [www.newadvent.org/cathen/06379b.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06379b.htm); [www.crisismagazine.com/2012/a-statesman-after-gods-own-heart-gabriel-garcia-moreno](http://www.crisismagazine.com/2012/a-statesman-after-gods-own-heart-gabriel-garcia-moreno); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel\\_Garc%C3%ADa\\_Moreno](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Garc%C3%ADa_Moreno)

<sup>5</sup> [www.traditioninaction.org/OLGS/A011olgsQuito\\_Garcia\\_1.htm](http://www.traditioninaction.org/OLGS/A011olgsQuito_Garcia_1.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Both quotes cited at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel\\_Garc%C3%ADa\\_Moreno](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Garc%C3%ADa_Moreno) and [www.traditioninaction.org/OLGS/A011olgsQuito\\_Garcia\\_1.htm](http://www.traditioninaction.org/OLGS/A011olgsQuito_Garcia_1.htm) respectively.

<sup>7</sup> [www.tfp.org/a-victim-for-the-twentieth-century/](http://www.tfp.org/a-victim-for-the-twentieth-century/); [www.ourladyofgoodsuccess.com/pages/history](http://www.ourladyofgoodsuccess.com/pages/history); [www.michaeljournal.org/articles/roman-catholic-church/item/our-lady-of-good-success-in-quito-ecuador](http://www.michaeljournal.org/articles/roman-catholic-church/item/our-lady-of-good-success-in-quito-ecuador)

<sup>8</sup> Cited at [www.ourladyofgoodsuccess.com/pages/biography-of-gabriel-garcia-moreno](http://www.ourladyofgoodsuccess.com/pages/biography-of-gabriel-garcia-moreno)

<sup>9</sup> Given that the BVM used terms such as 'Freemasons' and 'President' which were unknown at the time (at least in the sense in which she uses them), I would guess it was the latter. The word 'President' was first used to refer to a political ruler of a nation in the US Constitution of 1787, whilst Ecuador's first known Masonic Lodge was established sometime in the 1800s, centuries after the BVM's speech. The prophecies about Moreno are not mentioned in original editions of Lady Maxwell-Scott's book of 1914, nor Fr Berthe's of 1889, so quite when they originated is unclear. It would appear that General Moreno was working on a summary of Sister Mariana's life before he died, based upon an old 1790 manuscript. After his death, Moreno's notes and original source material were burned or hidden, but a further set of notes made from these notes by a diligent nun in 1899 stand as the main basis of the story as it is told today. As such, this nun could easily have invented the 'prophecies' herself, after Moreno's assassination had already occurred. (See <http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?t=598847> and read both pages of the discussion)

<sup>10</sup> [www.traditioninaction.org/OLGS/A012olgsQuito\\_Garcia\\_2.htm](http://www.traditioninaction.org/OLGS/A012olgsQuito_Garcia_2.htm); [www.traditioninaction.org/OLGS/A013olgsQuito\\_Garcia\\_3.htm](http://www.traditioninaction.org/OLGS/A013olgsQuito_Garcia_3.htm)

<sup>11</sup> More detailed accounts of Moreno's miracles are online at [www.dolorosapress.com/Favors.pdf](http://www.dolorosapress.com/Favors.pdf) together with special invocatory prayers written in his name.

<sup>12</sup> Despite his name, Ecuador's President Lenin Moreno doesn't actually govern as a full-blown Leninist, however – although he did misleadingly campaign as being one, in many commentators' eyes.



# URGENT

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## Experiences of continued presence

**A feline encounter in Highgate Cemetery gets HELEN BARRELL thinking about why we see departed loved ones.**

To add to the collection of strange experiences recorded in London's Highgate Cemetery, (see, for example, Terry Wilkinson's letter in **FT373:71**) I would like to contribute one of my own, even though it turned out to have a prosaic outcome.

Last September, I was lucky enough to give an evening talk in the cemetery's historic former chapel. It was nearly nine o'clock when I finished, and it had grown dark. Rather than walk all the way down Swain's Lane to Chester Road, one of the guides who'd attended the talk offered to show my partner and I a shortcut – through the eastern side of the cemetery.

Who would turn down an opportunity like that? So off we went, with the torch on a mobile phone to guide us. We passed the resting places of the famous that line the main route, from Jeremy Beadle to Karl Marx. And somewhere along the way, we realised we weren't alone.

There, trotting along behind us, was a black cat.

Highgate Cemetery is surely the best place to be followed by a black cat, and it had an extra poignancy for us as we'd lost our much-loved, elderly black and white cat only a month before. For a moment, I allowed myself to think that perhaps the black cat was a visitor from the afterlife, who was trying to tell us that our cat was having a rum old time on the other side.

But this, sadly, wasn't the case. As soon as we turned around and stopped, the cat ran up to me and pawed at my legs, miaowing. Then it nudged the bag I was carrying



ABOVE: People often report glimpsing deceased loved ones – including cats.

– which contained a prawn sandwich. Not so much a cat with a message from the dead, but someone else's moggy with a taste for seafood.

We reached the gate and headed onto Chester Road. But the cat didn't follow. Instead it watched us through the railings and didn't go any further – which perhaps isn't spooky given that cats like to stick to their territories – even if it's a cemetery.

That said, for about two weeks after the death of our cat, he still seemed to be around. I often saw a black and white flash from the corner of my eye, as if he'd just run past. My partner felt him sitting behind him on the back of the sofa, as our cat had done in life. A work colleague related a similar experience when their cat went out one day and never

came back. My mother's elderly retriever died not long after our cat and she kept "seeing" him around as well – usually on the kitchen floor where he used to sprawl like a hairy rug. And a friend told me that for a few weeks after their friend's dog passed away, even visitors to their house saw the late pet from the corner of their eyes. And *FT*'s 'Ghostwatch' column has reported similar stories of "visits" from the recently deceased, including radio presenter Zoe Ball's story about her son hearing their cat just after it died (**FT402:20**).

This phenomenon isn't exclusive to late pets – after my stepgran passed away, I sometimes saw her out of the corner of my eye, shuffling along the hallway as she used to do. In fact, once when I thought I saw her, the

aforementioned retriever (before he departed this life) lifted his head and followed her progress. He seemed to have noticed the change in the atmosphere that heralded one of these shuffling visits from beyond. It's fitting, therefore, that he made his own post-mortem curtain calls.

Research into the phenomenon of seeing, hearing or otherwise experiencing the presence of recently deceased loved ones (human and animal) can be found in publications, such as the journal *Psychology and Psychotherapy*, published by The British Psychological Society. Jacqueline Hayes and Ivan Leudar's 2016 article, "Experiences of continued presence [ECPs]: On the practical consequences of 'hallucinations' in bereavement" doesn't claim a particular explanation for continued presences. They urge practitioners not to "assume ECPs are signs of pathology – often they have healing consequences", and that they should only be addressed if they cause the experiencer distress. JW Worden in *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy* (1991) suggests that thinking you hear, see or smell your late pet is perfectly normal.

Do our loved ones come to say goodbye, or does it take them a few weeks to realise they should pass on? Or is it a trick of the brain, filling in the gap for someone who is no longer there, until after a few weeks the gap is filled with other noise? I like to think that sometimes it might be a purely organic projection from the brain, a sort of pareidolia. But sometimes, perhaps, these ECPs are our loved ones, who aren't quite ready to go, and so they linger for a while – even our pets.

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## On the trail of Jack the Stripper

**CATHI UNSWORTH** puts the psycho into psychogeography on a tour of the mean streets and pop culture of Ladbroke Grove in the Fifties and Sixties.

It is 14 years since a book that should never have existed sent me on a long, strange trip back in time. David Seabrook's *Jack of Jumps*, published by Granta in 2006, was a non-fiction account of the short lives and violent murders of eight women working in the dangerous illicit sex industry, whose brutalised bodies were left in a strange pattern, in and along the Thames west of Hammersmith, between 1959 and 1965. The search for their killer(s) raised the biggest manhunt in Metropolitan Police history and was never officially solved. Yet, despite its scale and the fact it happened within the living memory of many, this was a case few could recall.

I had only vaguely been aware of the Hammersmith Nude or Towpath murders before. The official investigation considered the final six victims – Hannah Tailford (31), Irene Lockwood (24), Helene Barthelmy (22), Mary Fleming (30), Frances Brown (21) and Bridget O'Hara (27), all murdered between 2 February 1964 and 11 January 1965 – were murdered by a serial killer. But Seabrook's book and the first non-fiction account, crime reporter Brian McConnell's *Found Naked and Dead* (1974), thought the 1959 murder of Elizabeth Figg (21) and the discovery of the remains of Gwynneth Rees (22) in November 1963 were also connected. Neither can explain why: McConnell died in July 2004, Seabrook in January 2009. All eight women were asphyxiated, probably with their own undergarments, and had possessions and clothing removed,



leading Fleet Street to dub their attacker 'Jack the Stripper'.

Then, most potently, there's the geography of where they lived and died. Seabrook made me realise the centre of this story was not Hammersmith, but Ladbroke Grove, where I have lived since 1987. These women all took their final steps out of this world along streets I thought I knew well: I determined to go back in time to try and find them, let them say exactly what it was like to be a 'good time girl' in those bad old days. To do that, I made a sort of collage out of local history, popular culture and the voices of other residents of this time and place – and what a heady mix it proved.

Ladbroke Grove is now the home of multi-millionaire bankers, but in 1959 you could expect to find "more boys fresh from the nick, and national refugee minorities, and out-of-business whores, than anywhere else, I should expect, in London town," according to resident Colin MacInnes in his classic *Absolute Beginners*, published that year.

Here was where the *Windrush* generation washed up with Peter Rachman, the Polish associate of Christine Keeler and the Kray twins, who was the only landlord prepared to accommodate black

*The killer cocked a final snook at his pursuers before vanishing*

people in his crumbling Victorian terraces around Powis Square.<sup>1</sup> It's a part of London that puts the 'psycho' into psychogeography – acid bath killer John George Haigh, airman Neville Heath and former special constable John Christie had already been murdering their way through the locals. As a result of the housing situation, tensions between the incoming West Indians and the indigenous white population had been stoked into a full-blown riot the year before, with the help of Oswald Mosley's British Unionist Party. As *Absolute Beginners* puts it: "You wouldn't live in our Napoli if you could live anywhere else."

But there were plenty of creative types who did – an angry young generation of writers, musicians and Pop artists.

The last witness to see Elizabeth Figg alive dropped her at a coffee stand outside Holland Park tube at 1.10am on the morning of 17

LEFT: Gwynneth Rees, possibly the final victim of Jack the Stripper. FACING PAGE: A contemporary newspaper graphic shows the dates and locations of the serial killer's six official victims.

June 1959. Known as Betty, she was the sort of girl depicted in Arnold L. Miller's 1961 sexploitation flick *West End Jungle*, arriving in London, suitcase in hand, after being booted out of her broken home in Cheshire. Predatory pimps waited at train stations for such 'mysteries'. Betty had not been in London long before she was 'turned out' by her boyfriend, Trinidadian boxer Fenton 'Baby' Ward, one of Rachman's tenants.

Meanwhile, across the road in Lansdowne Studios, young engineer Joe Meek was working to produce his first LP, *I Hear A New World*, which he described as "sounds for astral travel". As well as inventing fantastic new recording techniques, Meek dabbled in Spiritualism – he would create his two biggest hits, 'Telstar' and 'Johnny Remember Me' following séances with his writing partner Geoff Goddard. Triangulating this corner, at number three Lansdowne Road, was the headquarters of the Christian-Spiritualist Greater World Association, founded by trance medium Winifred Moyes.

This inspired me to call my novel *Bad Penny Blues*, after the Humphrey Lyttelton hit engineered by Meek at Lansdowne, and to write the last moments of each of the murdered women as 'transmissions' – cries for help directed through the ether by Joe's music and 'heard' via the dreams of my central character Stella Reade. Stella lives at 19 Arundel Gardens W11, next door to the flat Joe shared with his boyfriend, Lionel Howard. It was there, in January 1958, that Meek performed the séance when he was told Buddy Holly would die in a plane crash on 3 February. Joe did manage to get a message to his idol, bound for a UK tour that





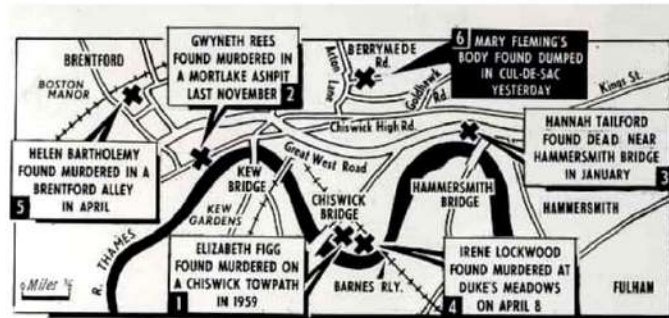
month – but it wasn't until a year later, on 3 February 1959, that Buddy met his fate.<sup>2</sup> Months later, Elizabeth Figg's body was found just before dawn on the banks of the Thames in Duke's Meadows, Chiswick. She had been strangled, the front of her dress ripped open. Her handbag and shoes were missing and her face washed clean.

Meek would know the heights of success with his Novello award-winning 'Telstar' in 1963 and the depths of despair, addiction and blackmail over his then illegal homosexuality before he came to his own violent end, taking his landlady Violet Shelton with him, at his Holloway Road studios on 3 February 1967.

The corner of Lansdowne Road and Holland Park Avenue remains haunted. One reported sighting of final victim, Bridget O'Hara, was on the same spot, on the night of 12 January 1965. Her body was not discovered until 16 February, near an electricity substation on the Heron Trading Estate in Acton.

In *Bad Penny Blues*, Stella and her friend Jenny Minton are part of the nascent Pop Art scene, inspired by the fact that Peter Blake, David Hockney and Derek Boshier lived in Ladbroke Grove while studying at the Royal College of Art. Ken Russell captures them in his 1962 *Monitor* film *Pop Goes The Easel*, in their bedsit ateliers and at basement jazz clubs. Most luminous among them is Pauline Boty, who in 1959 was actively campaigning against the post-War rebuild that threatened historic London with its smash-and-grab redevelopment attempts. The 'Anti Ugly' demos she led prevented the demolition of Piccadilly Circus, but failed to stop E Vincent Harris's Town Hall from being built on Thornton Street, Kensington. Where this building now stands, the body of penultimate victim, Frances Brown, was found, buried in rubble behind a civil defence shelter, on 25 November 1964.

Sixteen months previously, Brown had been one of the few witnesses to testify in the defence of society osteopath Stephen Ward, at his trial for procuring and living off immoral earnings instigated by the Profumo scandal. The former Minister for War's



involvement with Ward's muse and Rachman's old flame Christine Keeler became the public's introduction to 'our Napoli' and its Venn diagrams of vice.

Frances had much in common with the two victims who preceded her, Helene Bartholemy and Mary Fleming, all being slight, dark-haired Scotswomen who frequented the same hairdresser and pubs. At the Warwick Castle on Portobello Road, where Frances took her last drink, the landlord ran a sweepstake with his regulars on who would be next. It was a desperate attempt to laugh in the face of a killer who they believed had already put two of the pub's habitués, Hannah Tailford and Irene Lockwood, into the Thames.

Hannah, found on the Thames foreshore at Upper Mall on 2 February 1964, was not unfamiliar with Stephen Ward's milieu. She told stories of a party at a house in Eaton Square where, in the autumn of 1960, she was duped into providing a floorshow with a man in a gorilla suit for an audience in dinner suits and diamonds. More sinister still, she reportedly had a new beau who promised he would take her to live in Mortlake.<sup>3</sup> For it was there, in the Borough Council Refuse Disposal Plant, that the remains of Gwyneth Rees were discovered on 8 November 1963, buried in a shallow grave across the river from where Elizabeth Figg was found. Rees, who had been missing for three months, had no known connections to the others – her brief, brutal career in the sex industry had largely taken place in Whitechapel.

Irene Lockwood, found on the foreshore at Corney Reach on 8 April, knew Hannah and the circles she moved in. Before her death, she was working an after-

hours scam with the caretaker of the Holland Park Tennis Club, Kenneth Archibald, luring punters into illegal late-night gambling. Police found mention of a 'Kenny' in her diary – then Archibald turned up at Notting Hill nick, claiming responsibility. He seemed to know the method of her murder and the time and place she had been dropped into the river. But with no evidence other than this confession, he was acquitted; he then told the waiting press he'd made the whole story up while depressed. Besides, there had been another murder while he was in custody – Helene Bartholemy, found in a cul-de-sac in Brentford on the morning of 24 April.

Helene's body was covered in fine particles of paint – as were those of Mary Fleming and Bridget O'Hara – of the type used to respray cars. The Met threw considerable resources into trying to find the garage it came from. Twenty-four square miles of West London were broken into three sectors, each assigned to a detective sergeant with 12 officers.<sup>4</sup> The paint was finally traced to the Heron Trading Estate, close to where Bridget's body was placed – as if the killer was cocking a final snook at his pursuers before he vanished into thin air.

Pauline Boty never got to fulfil her potential either – she died aged 28 from a rare form of leukemia. You can still catch her on celluloid, briefly illuminating *Alfie* in 1966, and the ominously titled *Edgar Wallace Mystery Strangler's Web* in 1965. While still at the RCA, Pauline had attended a lecture on the New Existentialism by the second of Ladbroke Grove's literary Colins, Colin Wilson, who lived at 24 Chepstow Villas. This is the house immortalised in Wilson's 1961

debut novel *Adrift In Soho* and was also the inspiration for Lynne Reid Banks' 1960 *The L-Shaped Room*, filmed by Bryan Forbes in 1962.

*Bad Penny Blues* was written as a gut reaction to *Jack of Jumps*, not because I had any illusions about solving this mystery. During the course of my investigations, I thought I could maybe postulate a theory about what might have been, but the killer was not the most important person in this story for me – it was all about the victims. However, Seabrook's sulphurous attitude towards these women and the world they inhabited is not the reason I say his book should not have existed – it's because he was able to create it using the actual case files, which are supposed to be sealed to the public until 2050. He is no longer here to account for this. The mystery that continues to haunt is *why* he was allowed access to them.<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES AND SOURCES

1 Powis Square is the location of Turner's house in the 1970 Ladbroke Grove classic *Performance*. Johnny Shannon, who played Harry Flowers, went on to portray a Rachman-style landlord in Julien Temple's 1986 film adaptation of *Absolute Beginners*.

2 *The Legendary Joe Meek*, John Reptsch (Woodford House, 1989).

3 Brian McConnell, *Found Naked And Dead* (New English Library, 1974).

4 Tony Moore, *Policing Notting Hill: 50 Years of Turbulence* (Waterside Press, 2013).

5 In *Dead Fashion Girl* (Strange Attractor Press, 2019) Fred Vermorel ascertains who gave Seabrook access to the verboten files. Stewart Home speculates why at [www.stewarthomesociety.org/seabrook.htm](http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/seabrook.htm).



A new edition of *Bad Penny Blues* by Cathi Unsworth is available from Strange Attractor Press (<http://strangeattractor.co.uk>), RRP £10.99

❖ CATHI UNSWORTH is the author of six pop-cultural noir novels. A regular contributor to FT, she has given many talks and walks for The Sohemian Society, The London Fortean Society, The Barbican Centre and The Bishopsgate Institute. She lives and works in Ladbroke Grove, London. For more go to [www.cathiunsworth.co.uk](http://www.cathiunsworth.co.uk)



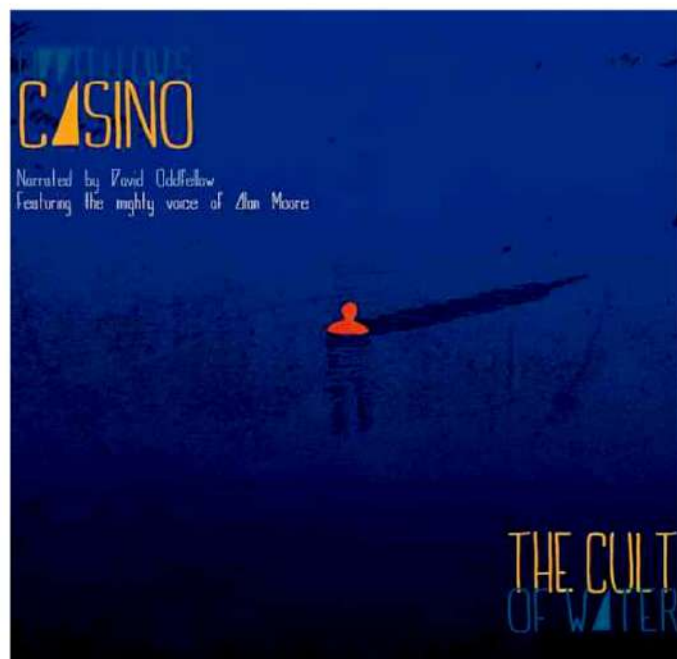
## Beneath the dark and lonely waters

With his new album, David Bramwell tries to solve the riddle of a drowned village that haunted his 1970s childhood. **DAVID CLARKE** finds fortaean nuggets in *The Cult of Water*.

“I have heard one definition of haunting saying we are haunted by that which we cannot or cannot completely understand.” These words of wisdom, spoken by England’s greatest living wizard, Alan Moore, open *The Cult of Water*, a dreamy, hypnotic sonic production by David Bramwell and Oddfellows Casino.

Six years in the making, the album combines spoken word, field recordings, pastoral electronica and nostalgic psych-folk that will delight fans of the Haunted Generation. Donald Pleasance’s scary voiceover from the 1973 public information film *The Spirit of Dark and Lonely Waters* neatly evokes David’s fear of being dragged deep beneath the surface by the river goddess, a theme that recurs throughout this watery odyssey. His project first took form in 2017 as *Dead Flows the Don*, an episode in BBC Radio 3’s experimental series *Between the Ears*. It premiered the following year on stage as a candlelit performance at Brighton Festival, mixing music, archive film, narration, ritual and animation. David then embarked on a theatre and festival tour that included dates in Sheffield and Doncaster (Roman *Danum*) both towns that grew alongside the mighty river Don.

Haunted by his 1970s childhood in Doncaster, David takes listeners on a journey to the river’s source deep in the Pennine hills, in search of the pre-Christian goddess Danu. For our ancestors, rivers were supernatural in origin



and to cross or enter one was to go through a portal to another world where the flow of time behaves differently. In Celtic Britain, rivers formed boundaries between tribal territories, and offerings of coins, swords and shields were cast into the waters to appease the spirits that, on occasion, dragged unwary trespassers to their deaths. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Don was subjugated to serve the industrial revolution, and in Sheffield the city’s steel industry adopted Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and forge, to represent power over the forces of nature as personified in the river. On occasion, the Don has fought back – most recently in 2007 when the river overwhelmed the city centre – and much like other vengeful river deities in folklore “the shelving slimy river Don” was once believed to take “a daughter or a son” every year. Indeed, Sheffield-born musician Jarvis Cocker and his Pulp bandmate Russell Senior have spoken of times when they tossed coins into the Don to appease the spirit of dark and lonely waters that haunted the childhood imaginations of their generation.

*“I had believed they were seeing what they said they were seeing”*

David Bramwell’s time-travelling trip upstream, which forms the centrepiece of *The Cult of Water*, is book-ended by a startling incident that leaves both narrator and listener questioning the nature of memory and its interaction with the ebb and flow of time. It centres on a childhood memory of a church spire peeking out from the depths of a Derbyshire reservoir. At the height of the heatwave and drought of 1976, eight-year-old David joined a family excursion to the Ladybower Reservoir, a popular tourist attraction in the Peak District National Park, to see the drowned church and its tower. A huge artificial dam was constructed here before World War II to provide drinking water for Sheffield and the surrounding

towns. Derwent’s parish church held its last service in 1943 before parishioners were evacuated and the upper valley was flooded with millions of gallons of water. But the church’s distinctive pointy spire was left standing. At times of drought, it would slowly emerge from the waters that surrounded it. For years the isolated spire drew huge crowds of sight-seers, some of whom were keen to explore it when droughts allowed access. A news account from 1947 describes how “this year’s drought left it high and dry and thousands of people climbed the wooden staircase inside.”

Derwent Church’s distinctive spire haunts the photos and artwork for the booklet that accompanies the album (illustrated by Pete Fowler, best known for his work with Super Furry Animals). The penultimate track follows David as he returns to the valley in search of the iconic spire that haunted his childhood. He cannot find it – because there was no spire peeking above the surface of Ladybower Reservoir in 1976. A book by local historian Vic Hallam, *Silent Valley*, reveals how, three decades earlier, in December 1947, the Derwent Valley Water Board demolished the church tower using explosives. “When I mention this to my family at first there is silence,” says David. “Then my dad says firmly: *I remember*. And we all do... We’re not alone; others saw it too.”

Among them are the family of Hilary Mantel, author of the Booker prize-winning novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bringing up the Bodies*. Mantel was born in Derbyshire in 1952 and family members lived in the area when the reservoirs were built. Unknown to David, Mantel also recalled being told in her childhood that “when the water was low they had seen the spire rising above the waters” until she realised this could not be true. In a BBC4 interview from March 2020 Mantel cites the story





as “very thought provoking” in her own journey as a writer and truth-seeker. “I had believed implicitly that they were seeing *what they said they were seeing*,” she said, adding: “Each individual acted in perfect good faith and yet passed on an accumulated untruth.” This increased her scepticism, “especially of those things that we instinctively move towards and want to believe.” It also made her reflect – much like David Bramwell – on different layers of reality, the nature of time and how fact, history and myth can merge into one.

What did all these people, including David and his family, see in 1976 and on other occasions? Was it some form of mirage, a shared vision or mass hallucination? Or is this another example of a false memory of the type identified by psychologists in many other perplexing incidents, such as those accounts of missing time that have often been transformed by the media into stories of abduction by aliens? When I first heard David’s account of the missing church spire and compared it with that of Hilary Mantel, it also reminded me of the phantom houses that are said to materialise on rare occasions before incredulous witnesses. Possibly the best known is the so-called Rougham mirage that has haunted a stretch of road in Suffolk for 150 years. On occasion, passers-by have been stunned to see a red-brick Georgian mansion house, complete with elaborate gardens, that vanishes on closer inspection. The forteen literature records examples of other phantom dwellings (see **FT282:16-17** and John Michell and Bob Rickard, *Phenomena: A Book of Wonders*, 1977, pp50-51).

Alongside sightings of the phantom spire of Ladybower others have reported strange occurrences in the Derwent valley that are often described as time-slips. These include the sound of eerie church bells and organ music “coming from beneath the water” where the village of Derwent once stood. According to author Wayne Boylan the sound is “sad and lonesome... and only snatches can be heard drifting across the still waters.”



The valley is also haunted by a phantom Lancaster bomber of WWII vintage that has regularly been seen skimming the surface of the water on moonlit nights (see **FT107:39-42**). The Howden dam and reservoir further north were used by the RAF’s famous 617 Squadron, led by Wing Commander Guy Gibson, for target practice during the secret development of the ‘bouncing bomb’ that was used in the ‘Dambuster’ raids on the Mohne and Eder dams in Germany during 1943.

Since the mid-1980s reports began to reach local media from visitors who are convinced they have seen a prop-driven RAF Lancaster aircraft skimming low

above the reservoir complex. Sometimes these sightings have been so circumstantial that inquiries have been made with the operators of the UK’s single airworthy Lancaster, based at the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight in Coningsby, Lincolnshire, always without result. Some witnesses have claimed the vintage plane they saw was so low they instinctively felt the urge to ‘duck’ their heads as it passed overhead. Their descriptions do not match those of the giant RAF Hercules transports that sometimes hedge-hop along the valley and which I have seen on several occasions. One couple who saw the ‘phantom bomber’ from a layby on the Ladybower reservoir on an October night in 1982 initially thought the object was a hang glider. Then a burst of moonlight revealed the distinctive outline of the wartime Lancaster. Unlike a real Lancaster, however, the phantom version was uncannily silent and “continued flying over the reservoir... and then, quite suddenly, vanished before our eyes, leaving us stunned.”

**LEFT:** The spire of Derwent Church high and dry in the drought of 1947. **BELOW LEFT:** On a 1946 postcard, the spire is visible above the reservoir’s waters, which had risen due to heavy rain and floods.

Others have reported their sightings to the emergency services, fearing the pilot had crashed into the steep hills of the Peak District. Sightings of phantom planes are well known from other locations in the UK and abroad and are often associated with a tragic loss of life, but although there have been up to 55 air-crashes in the Peak District since WWII none has involved a Lancaster. Since WWII, airworthy vintage aircraft have visited the valley regularly to take part in well-advertised anniversary fly-overs. The first of these was during the filming of the movie *The Dam Busters*, released in 1955 starring Richard Todd as Gibson and Michael Redgrave as Dr Barnes Wallis, the inventor of the bouncing bomb.

Is it possible more recent visits, including the one in 1993 to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing raid, have triggered an existing folk memory to produce vivid experiences of the type reported by visitors to Ladybower? The process whereby tradition, belief, suggestion, imagination and memory interact with objects in the landscape in an ongoing, dynamic process that produces accounts of mysterious ‘timeslips’. David Bramwell’s journey ultimately leads him to the conclusion that the most powerful force in *his* landscape and the most powerful forces on Earth are represented by the waters that consumed Derbyshire’s answer to Atlantis.

**The Cult of Water CD** is available from <https://oddfellowscasino.com/> and the accompanying booklet, by David Bramwell and Pete Fowler is published by <http://roughtradebooks.com/>

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## Fort: 'Everything is fiction'

The histories of forteana and science fiction are deeply intertwined, **Andrew May** finds in this well-researched study of Charles Fort's influence on Arthur C Clarke and other classic SF writers

### The Fortean Influence on Science Fiction

**Charles Fort and the Evolution of the Genre**

Tanner F Boyle

McFarland 2021

Pb, 188pp, £47.50, ISBN 9781476677408

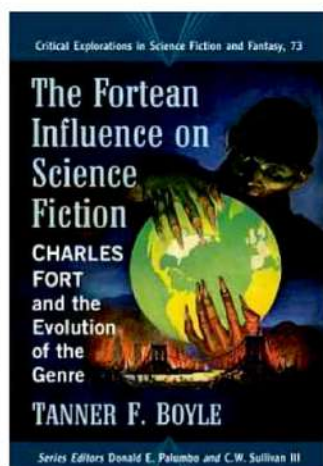
With so much subject matter in common, from extraterrestrials and time travellers to ESP and alternate realities, it's no surprise that the histories of forteana and SF are intertwined. This magazine, for example, might not exist if founding editor Bob Rickard hadn't picked up the collected works of Charles Fort at an SF convention in the 1960s. The influence goes in the opposite direction too, from forteana to SF – and as the title indicates, that's Tanner Boyle's main focus in this book (though there's a secondary theme too, which I'll come to later).

It's remarkable, given the high profile that SF enjoys today – and Fort's relative obscurity – how much the genre owes to him. As Boyle says, "without Fort, SF's development would have been radically different". A similar sentiment was voiced by one of the giants of SF, Arthur C Clarke, who spoke of the "tremendous impact" Fort's writing had on the field. A classic biography of Fort, *Prophet of the Unexplained*, was written by SF author Damon Knight, who agreed that "Fort's influence on other writers is incalculable".

One reason for this influence is easy to trace. Early pulp magazine editors enthusiastically pushed Fort's ideas at their readers and writers. *Astounding Stories*, for example, serialised the entirety of Fort's third book, *Lo!*, in 1934. This was how many

people, Clarke included, first encountered Fort. A subsequent editor of *Astounding*, John W Campbell, described Fort's work as a "magnificent source-book and challenge to readers and writers of SF", which "probably averages one SF or fantasy plot idea to the page".

Interestingly, Fort himself started out as a fiction writer. Boyle describes one of his stories, "A Radical Corpuscle", dating from 1906, "involving a group of cells who become aware that they are living within another organism, a larger, cosmic body." This seems to prefigure Fort's suggestion that humanity is just a tiny part of a bigger picture, achieving its most striking form in his notion that "we are property".



That quotation has inspired no end of SF stories. Among the first was Eric Frank Russell's *Sinister Barrier*, whose appearance in *Astounding's* sister magazine *Unknown* is illustrated on Boyle's cover. As Bob Rickard has recounted (FT312:48-51), Russell was a key figure in the development of both forteana and SF, albeit one who is largely forgotten

*Campbell said Fort's work "probably averages one SF or fantasy plot idea to the page"*

today. That's hardly true of Russell's younger protégé, Arthur C Clarke, whose masterpiece 2001: *A Space Odyssey* is a more famous take on the "we are property" trope. For that matter, many of us first learned of fortean phenomena through Clarke's *Mysterious World* TV shows in the 1980s.

Clarke is one of several authors that Boyle devotes a whole chapter to. Another is Philip K Dick, much of whose work seems to come straight from a passage in Fort's *Book of the Damned*: "Ours is a pseudo-existence, and all appearances in it partake of its essential fictitiousness." Yet apart from a brief reference in an early story, "The Indefatigable Frog", it's not clear from Dick's writing that he had any interest in Fort's work per se.

Fortunately, Boyle is able to set the record straight here. He quotes an email from Dick's widow, Tessa, confirming that he "read and admired Fort's work" and avidly consumed biographical material on Fort.

Dick also corresponded with fortean author Brad Steiger in the wake of the "mystical experience" that led to his semi-autobiographical novel *VALIS* – which, as Boyle says, "does at many points read like a technologically updated rendition of Fort's theories."

A secondary theme running through the book concerns what Boyle dubs "maybe-fiction", referring to imaginative specula-

tions on SF-like subjects which are presented as the truth. An intriguing characteristic of maybe-fiction is the way different authors develop and build on each other's ideas, creating what Boyle calls "a vast web of intertextuality". The result, as well as being impressive enough to persuade believers, provides a handily exploitable framework for SF authors.

A good example is the way alternative historical narratives created by writers like Erich von Däniken and Zecharia Sitchin – which Boyle describes as a "wellspring of creativity" – can inspire anything from Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* to at least one *Scooby-Doo* plotline.

The boundary between fiction and maybe-fiction is a blurred one. When Charles Fort embarked on *The Book of the Damned*, he wrote that "I've given up fiction... or in a way I haven't. I'm convinced that everything is fiction, so here I am in the same old line."

By coincidence or otherwise, several of the most successful purveyors of maybe-fiction, from Donald Keyhoe and John Keel to Whitley Strieber and Jacques Vallée, also produced works of "real" SF.

All in all Boyle has produced an engrossing and eye-opening book, which is well-researched and painstakingly referenced, and written in much the same style as an article in this magazine. Unfortunately it's been packaged as an academic work, with a price tag to match (though the ebook is more affordable). But if your budget can handle it, and you're interested in the parallel histories of forteana and SF, it's definitely worth checking out.

★★★★★



# A failed superhero

**Noel Rooney** on the high strangeness of American alt-right conspiracists

## American Madness

**The Story of the Phantom Patriot and How Conspiracy Theories Hijacked American Consciousness**

Tea Krulos

Feral House 2020

Pb, 281pp, £19.99, ISBN 9781627310963

Tea Krulos is a writer who specialises in exploring the eccentric margins of American life. In this book he recounts the life and times of Richard McCaslin, aka the Phantom Patriot, and his fatal downward spiral into the rabbit hole of conspiracy theory and alt-right rage. McCaslin's exploits are not well-known; the Phantom Patriot never became, as McCaslin hoped, one of the leading lights of the Real Life Superhero (RLSH) movement, and his contribution to the "self-investigation" branch of conspiracy theory went largely unacknowledged (and occasionally disowned) by the luminaries of the Conspirasphere.

McCaslin's story is poignant, eccentric and ultimately tragic. An ex-marine who never quite managed to fit in, he lived a second life through the comic books he avidly read and enthusiastically produced. He turned from amateur comic-book artist to RLSH cosplayer, taking his character, the Phantom Patriot, on a quest to infiltrate and destroy the infamous Bohemian Grove. Caught trying to burn down a building in the secretive complex, he was convicted and served six years in prison.

After his release in 2008 he reprised his superhero alter-ego and invented another, Thoughtcrime, and toured the USA trying to spread the gospel of war against the Deep State. Few listened, and McCaslin became increasingly

frustrated, his unrequited love for a small-time country singer adding to his existential misery. Eventually, in 2018, he took himself, in costume, to Washington DC where, in the shadow of a masonic temple, he committed a grisly and inept version of suicide with a bolt gun. His gruesome end went largely unnoticed too.

Krulos first came across the Phantom Patriot while researching his book *Heroes in the Night*, about the RLSH movement. *American Madness* is in part a chronicle of his – at times friendly, at times contentious and distant – relationship with a man on the fringes of American



society, and often on the fringes of sanity. It is also a meditation on the polarisation of American society and culture, especially since the Internet brought conspiracy theory to the attention of the religious right and created a loose

community of belief that has become detached from the mainstream of American culture and, some might argue, from reality too.

The life of this eccentric and tragic individual is framed in a loose (and at times peculiarly shallow) history of modern conspiracy theory and how, as Krulos puts it, conspiracy theories have "hijacked American consciousness". McCaslin comes across as both an exemplar and a symbol of the high strangeness that passes for politics in the USA, and some of the proponents of alt-right conspiracy theory, such as Alex Jones, are cast as villains, leading the likes of the Phantom Patriot down the rabbit hole and abandoning them there. *American Madness* is amiable, and at times lazy, but McCaslin's story is mordantly compelling.

★★★

## No Earthly Pole

**The search for the truth about the Franklin expedition 1845**

Ernest C Coleman

Amberley Publishing 2020

Hb, 352pp, £25, ISBN 9781398102118

Bob Dylan was taught the words to the haunting ballad "Lord Franklin" by Martin Carthy, and even the author was forced to sing this Victorian art song (probably after the Pentangle version) while filming for a French film crew on King William Island – the icy setting of the lament that records the lost Franklin Expedition of 1845 trying to complete the Northwest Passage in the Canadian Arctic. Over a century later only the song remained in popular culture, better known than the events it records. The finding of Franklin's two ships HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* in 2014 and 2016 has changed that, leading to documentaries, novels and inspiring the current television horror drama *The Terror*.



This very personal book is an account of Coleman's physical quest to discover the grave truth about the end of Franklin's expedition. Most is a diary account (1990–95) of his trips to King William Island, written in a low-key, straightforward manner that conveys the day-long monotonal, mainly solitary grimness and slog alongside rare hours of hopeful discovery. Despite the lack of decent maps and interesting photographs, this part of the book is quite readable.

The last 100 pages, "the search for the truth", discusses and dismisses myths, ancient and modern, around the loss of the Franklin expedition, notably the suggestion of cannibalism and lead or zinc poisoning from tinned food. The first he dismisses as being initially 19th-century Inuit and Hudson Bay self-serving hearsay, and both as over-interpreted 20th-century forensics. His account of the finding of the two expedition ships in 2014/16, far from their last visual sighting (*Terror* foundered in the coincidentally named Terror Bay) is at some variance with official Canadian media versions and has a conspiracy feel. Coleman, how-

ever, is not averse to a little potential myth-making himself as he gives hints that the expedition's finality could have come with Inuit massacre(s) of debilitated scurvy-ridden Brits. Perhaps.

Two things become apparent. Arctic archaeological research has always rested on very thin physical, cultural and political ice seemingly chain-linked to Canadian sovereignty. Secondly, Coleman is frozen in by his loyalty and views all through his naval family, being more vexed by perceived slights to the Royal Navy, especially misuse of their arcane nomenclature, and the pretensions of accredited academics/experts, than remaining open-minded. No more so than his response to the dismissal of his finding the "Holy Grail of Arctic scholars, Sir John's Grave", in two elongated mounds on the northwest coast of the island. Despite fieldwork and excavation showing them to be natural with no artefacts, he invokes (an undiscovered) Sutton Hoo as his and their (Franklin's men) inspiration. The "grave" is Coleman's contribution and recompense for his discomfort, he will not gainsay it – but they are drumlins.

Seemingly myths come and go, but what of Sir John's remains?

*In Baffin's Bay where the whale fishes blow*

*The fate of Franklin no man may know*

*The fate of Franklin no tongue can tell*

*Lord Franklin along with his sailors do dwell.*

Quite!

Rob Ixer

★★★

## The Organ Thieves

**The Shocking Story of the First Heart Transplant in America's Segregated South**

Chip Jones

Quercus 2020

Hb, 390pp, £18.99, ISBN 9781529400588

The history of race and exploitation within medicine has been explored in several outstanding books in recent years. In *The Organ Thieves*, Chip Jones charts a similar course to Rebecca Skloot in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, using a single case study to explore medicine and race in the American South during the 1960s and 70s.





The end of segregated hospital wards after the 1964 Civil Rights Act may have made racial segregation less immediately evident, but it continued in other ways: many black patients were treated in outdated and understaffed facilities set apart from main hospitals. In the same period, excitement surrounded advances in transplantation, particularly the prospect of heart transplants at a time when heart disease was on the rise. It was against this background that a 54-year-old black man, Bruce Tucker, sustained a head injury in 1968. He died within hours of his arrival at the Medical College of Virginia; his heart was transplanted into a white businessman. *The Organ Thieves* is an engaging exploration of this event, also touching upon longer histories of medical exploitation and the reluctance of some institutions to reckon with their troubling pasts.



Occasional factual errors are unfortunate, suggesting that existing historical work has been consulted haphazardly. Jones repeats the popular myth that the Tuskegee syphilis study infected hundreds of black Americans with syphilis. Though the truth of the study is no less abhorrent (men with existing infection were recruited and treatment was withheld), it is an important distinction given that, elsewhere, Jones notes how mythology and reality can overlap and inform one another.

Although *The Organ Thieves* opens with Tucker's story, this is soon overtaken by the stories of those around him: high-flying, often arrogant surgeons who became minor celebrities. Other stories might have been integrated to avoid the impression that mid 20th-century medicine was advanced solely by heroic white doctors – where, for example, are those black doctors who were excluded from the American Medical Association? The reluctance of Tucker's family members to speak to Jones is understandable, and the author recognises the limitations of his insight into black experience in his closing lines: "my testimony has been weak." Though it is a tale engagingly told, *The Organ*

*Thieves* leaves us little the wiser about 20th-century medical ethics, or – crucially – black encounters with medicine.

Jen Wallis

★ ★ ★

## Fabulosa!

**The Story of Polari, Britain's Secret Gay Language**

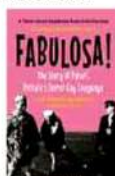
Paul Baker

Reaktion 2020

Pb, 320pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781789142945

Anyone of a certain age will remember *Round the Horne*. One of the funniest creations to air on BBC radio, Julian and Sandy appeared in the last sketch every week – but where did their coded language spring from? This book sets out to reveal the fascinating history of Polari.

Paul Baker, now a professor of linguistics at Lancaster University, did his PhD on Polari 20 years ago; this is his third book on the subject. The first chapter covers what Polari actually is; is it a language or a slang? He considers the complicated roots of Polari as it combines with slangs such as Cant, a thieves' language, and Parlyaree, a showmen's, into the overall language of show people, actors, dancers and gays. He comes up with a rather lovely definition of it as "a linguistic form of drag".



We learn of the dreadful consequences for those accused and found guilty of homosexual acts, from imprisonment to the death penalty, and how Polari was at first an attempt at concealment from prying ears, though of course not eyes if – as Baker says – you did not conform to expected norms of dress and behaviour. During the Sixties a thaw of a sort occurred, though the societal transformation was still relatively slight and homosexuals still lived under threat of attacks from politicians, the media and the church.

It was at this stage that Polari received perhaps its biggest boost as *Round the Horne* was broadcast from 1964 to 1968, to an audience of up to nine million listeners a week. Kenneth Horne was the narrator, with Hugh Paddick as Julian and Kenneth Williams as Sandy playing two out of work actors. They were very funny indeed, and Baker devotes a whole

chapter to them. It was from this point though, that the use of Polari fell out of fashion. After all, what use is a secret language that is no longer a secret?

The answer to this question, along with some splendid diversions, is covered by this book, which includes a very useful glossary. It will also probably send you rushing to listen to *Round the Horne* again. Bona.

Simon Trezies

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

## This Cryptid World

**A Global Survey of Undiscovered Beasts**

Karl Shuker, illus Brian Rau

Herb Lester Associates 2020

£12, ISBN 9781916349506

What you get here is a folder, a two-sided poster/map and a card. The folder proclaims that what we have in our hands is "A Guide to the Highly Unusual" and we are invited to set aside our scepticism and venture on a tour of cryptids, 15 mystery species awaiting us inside. Along with a model jackalope. A model jackalope? This is a piece of card folded in half with a picture of a jackalope on one side and an X-ray view of the same thing on the reverse. Helpfully it is labelled with such useful items as "fur coat". Possibly only useful if you have a cryptozoologist's birthday coming up.



What about the poster/map? One side has illustrations of 15 cryptids, all paintings/drawings. Some are drawn completely and some are half an X-ray, for some reason. Most have some sort of sketch indication of their habitat and some have extra additions, for example a close-up drawing of the belly mouth of the mapinguary or a bigfoot footprint. All of the illustrated animals are genuine cryptids so the jackalope is only on the card and not here. On the reverse side of the sheet there is a map of the world with a cursory indication of where some of these creatures may be encountered. For each of the cryptids there are a couple of paragraphs of text written by FT's very own Karl Shuker. Most have a small section telling us about the creature and a bit about sightings. They're well written

and pack a lot of information about each, but there is so much more that could be said. About 200 words for lake monsters? Another 200 on mystery cats?

One wonders who this is aimed at. A general book on cryptozoology would cost a similar price and give way more information. The illustrations are not so beautiful (fun though they are) that you would want to frame them and hang them on the wall. The map is of such a scale as to be almost useless. Overall, a nice idea; but it doesn't quite work.

Gordon Rutter

★ ★

## Disembodied Voices

**True Accounts of Hidden Beings**

Tim Marczenko

Schiffer 2020

Hb, 176pp, £19.99, ISBN 9780764360237

This solid book is not about the "electronic voice phenomenon" but something far more ancient and eerie. Marczenko has been fascinated by the motif of voices calling people from woods, books, masks, statues, rocks and other unlikely objects. When the Egyptian sailor Thamus passed the island of Paxi, he heard a voice call him by name, shouting "Great Pan is dead!" Whose voice it was remains an enduring mystery, as recorded by Plutarch when the truth of Thamus's tale was investigated by the court of Tiberius.



Ever since he had a similar experience of his own, the subject occupied Marczenko's research, resulting in this intelligent and engagingly written study. It is full of amazing and disturbing accounts, from all eras up to the present. Some of these otherworldly voices seem enticing, some deceitful, some threatening, some prophetic, some sought by divination and others unbidden... all disturbing in diverse ways. Some have been entire conversations. Whether they are spontaneous hallucinations, unconscious vocalisations or something more mysterious and numinous, they have never been discussed and analysed in such engrossing detail before.

Bob Rickard

★ ★ ★ ★



# Rambling romances

Mediæval tales of adventures in wondrous places can all become a bit samey, says folklorist **Jeremy Harte**

## Travels to the Otherworld and other Fantastic Realms

Mediæval Journeys into the Beyond

Claude and Corinne Lecouteux, eds

Inner Traditions 2020

Hb, 232pp, £25, ISBN 9781620559420

Magnetic mountains, topless fairies, monster frogs of varied colours – what's not to like in this collection of mediæval adventure stories? Claude and Corinne Lecouteux have collected tales in languages from Greek to Czech about heroes who step off the edge of ordinary reality and pass through strange worlds. Some are actual journeys out of the map, others venture into an uncanny fairy realm, while the Irish knight Tundal lies motionless between life and death while his soul travels through the afterlife. Bit of a mixed bag, then.

The illustrations are derived from woodcuts and manuscripts over four centuries, and mingle strange worlds with familiar scenery (now equally strange to us). To describe what no one has ever seen gives free rein to the imagination. There's a good reason why contemporary fantasy uses dragons, castles and other mediæval props: the mediævals were there already. Their heroes, whether taken from the classics, like King Alexander, or from German folk tradition like Duke Ernst and Marcolf the Fool, all wander through vast landscapes where mountains can be multiplied without contradiction. Everything foreign is wonderful, including death and what follows, described in the bright colours that must come naturally to a soul no longer clouded by base matter. Of course if you wanted your afterlife vision to be believed, it helped to describe the same heaven as everyone else; but the epic journeys are

just as repetitive, even though they were only literature.

Their geography is unreliable. By the time we meet "King Filsofus, who ruled over England or Mesopotamia", we realise that the authors didn't give a damn, which is why King Solomon appears with a guard of Knights Templar. Even Dan Brown might have jibbed at that one, and at the splendid anachronisms of the illustrators who portray Tundale (died, temporarily, in 1049) with full 16th-century plate armour. It is possibility, not plausibility, that excites the authors. What now is real was once only imagined – diving-bells, artificial light, lands ruled by women. When Ernst and Count Wenzel arrive in the Land of the Crane-Men, they can tell they are in an enchanted otherworld because it has hot and cold running water.

However far we travel, we still find ourselves on arrival. When the Italian knight Guer-in ventures into the forbidding caverns of the fairy

Alcina, their dialogue reflects the difference between real-life men and women. King Alexander travels to the end of inhabited space to find talking trees that will tell him about the end of time – his own time, for even kings must die. At its most credible, fantasy draws on the strangeness hidden in our own lives and makes it live with unexpected details – but alas, the stories gathered by the Lecouteux duo seldom reach this level. Their wonders are threadbare and rely on easy tricks. Penny-a-line romancers tended to assume that nothing was interesting unless it was studded with gems, made out of unicorn parts or given to supernatural movement.

The strength of this wide-ranging anthology lies in the

unfamiliarity of the texts it gathers, but that is also its weakness: they're unfamiliar because they aren't very good. Claude Lecouteux knows the byways of mediæval literature, but many of these discoveries would have been more interesting as raw material for one of his pathbreaking surveys of the supernatural. If the traveller has no character, then eventually the repetition of "and in another island" will get tiresome. Marcolf is a master of disguise, which in the hands of a more talented author could have commented on the superficiality of a society in which clothes infallibly make the man. As it is, the trick is just used again and again in the absence of any idea of plotting. It's not as if mediæval people couldn't construct a well-planned story. Chaucer knew how to, and so did the old women telling folktales by the fireside. *Travels to the Otherworld* is rounded off by a couple of 15th-century anecdotes, one a version of the Emperor's New Clothes, and both are well-paced and amusingly told. It's the romances which ramble.

In the 16th century, when mediæval Europe discovered the world, people took their bearings from these travel stories. Pity, then, that they are so uncomprehendingly brutal in their treatment of the Other. Alexander slaughters his guides every time something goes wrong – can't trust these foreigners! Young Bruncvik, hero of a Czech romance, has been welcomed by King Olibrius, who though a monster makes a fuss of him and marries him to the monster princess, but after a while it gets kind of boring, so the hero has a bright idea and makes his escape by decapitating them all. It's all right because "these folk are heathens", as Ernst says after having massacred the crane-men with his superior technology. Even fantasy has consequences, especially for other people.

★ ★ ★

## Written in Bone

Hidden Stories in what We Leave Behind

Sue Black

Doubleday 2020

Hb, 368pp, £18.99, ISBN 9780857526908

This is Dame Professor Sue Black's sequel to her award-winning first account of forensic archaeology, *All That Remains*. Black forges on into the highly disturbing worlds of murder, genocide and infanticide with a practical level-headedness and innate respect, focusing on the intricate craft of her work piecing together fragments of skeleton to identify an individual and the instrument used in



their downfall. In many cases her work leads to the conviction of the perpetrator.

Written in *Bone's* chapters are dedicated

to each major bone in the body, from skull to foot. Each chapter divulges the biological characteristics of each bone (how it is formed, grows and repairs itself), and goes on to true life stories and crime investigations concerning each body part, from a carer who hid her elderly client's severed head in her greenhouse to how not to mistake horse tail bones for human fingers! The book could easily have come across as insensitive and sensationalist, yet it is anything but. This is someone with a deep knowledge and experience of working on criminal cases together with pathologists and police, yet she approaches each skeleton, whether a victim of crime or a one-legged knight unearthed from a mediæval churchyard, with the same professionalism and wry, appropriate humour.

There are several similar true-crime books, though most are written by forensic pathologists, with a medical approach rather than an archaeological, historical one. Black's different yet complementary occupation offers a fresh viewpoint on the subject.

A must read for any crime writer who strives to make a story more believable, or anyone with an interest in the science and nature of the human form. Or, indeed, anyone who appreciates a good story.

Kathryn Clover

★ ★ ★ ★





## ALSO RECEIVED

WE LEAF THROUGH A SMALL SELECTION OF THE DOZENS OF BOOKS THAT HAVE ARRIVED AT FORTÉAN TOWERS IN RECENT MONTHS...

### Ethel Post Parrish Mediumship in America

Gerald O'Hara

Privately published, 2020

Pb, 240pp, £12.01. ISBN 9798663887489

Ethel Post was a colourful and influential character in the world of American Spiritualism between the 1930s and 1950s. Her séances – well-known for manifesting a wide range of 'spirit' forms (visible in dim red light), as well as her 'Indian' guide 'Silver Belle' – were attended by both celebrities and other famous mediums. Lam-pooned by Houdini and dogged by a sceptical press, which delighted in the tales of police raids, undercover journalists, and accusations of fraud, she was also a pioneering female entrepreneur who ran a successful Spiritualists' retreat while being unfortunately beset by court cases over leases and legacies. O'Hara's well-written and deeply researched study about the woman and the medium adds much to our understanding of contemporary Spiritualism in which she flourished.

### How to Survive Anything The Ultimate Readiness Guide

Michael Fleeman

Centennial Books, 2020

Flexibound, 191pp, £12.99. ISBN 9781951274290

This manual – copiously illustrated in full colour with minimal text (presumably because you might not have much time for detailed explanation) – presents the essential dos and don'ts when you are faced with seven categories of life-threatening situations: including the wrath of nature, crime and terrorism, wild-life (really wild), wildernesses, transportation accidents, 'doomsday', and basic 'survival'. There are timely (or should that be 'opportunistic') section on COVID and other pandemics, cybercrime and advice on coping with sieges and evacuating your town or city. It's an amusing yet instructive book (but vies with eight other identical titles) should you have the bad luck to need it ... but there is no harm in being prepared, right? Like the

10-year-old who, when attacked by an alligator, kept calm and fended it off by poking her fingers up the beast's nose.

### Serial Killers Butchers and Cannibals

Nigel Blundell

Wharncliffe True Crime, 2020

Pb, 176pp, £12.99. ISBN 9781526764409

Its one of those jobs that somebody had to do, but journalist Blundell does it well. The subject matter is sensational enough, so he offers a reassuring hand, keeping calm while he guides us through the incomprehensible minds behind the killings and the subsequent mutilations and cannibalism. Nothing the killers say about their own feelings or motives, recorded here, can be trusted as they are quite lost and alien to human normality (whatever that is). The 29 serial killers portrayed here are stranger and more terrifying than any imagined alien invader. A useful reference, should you need one.

### Introducing UFOs A Young Person's Guide

Phillip Mantle

Flying Disk Press, 2020

Pb, 158pp, £15.00. ISBN 9798654158369

It's not often that an exposition on UFOs is aimed at "young persons" as the subtitle here declares. Seven chapters divide the historical account into distinct decades, the last covering 2000 "and beyond". Philip Mantle — a veteran ufologist and perennial director of BUFORA — provides a fairly restrained text, presenting a sample of key incidents with selected supportive witness quotations. There are no references for quotations; no further reading; and the whole is marred by poor proofing from Flying Disk. This thin book does benefit from being prolifically illustrated with documents, portraits, and imaginative illustrations by Ronald Kinsela and others. Given the importance of proper guidance for young readers new to the subject, the introduction is woefully brief. It merely points to the historicity of anomalous aerial phenomena

before challenging the readers to decide for themselves. The guidance for analysis is pitiful. After referring to "many theories" the by-now stunned reader is asked to choose between natural phenomena, secret military aircraft, or alien visitation. The authors favour the latter because "claims of contact with aliens [...] come from all over the world and are remarkably similar in detail." Sad to say, this pointless book is a missed opportunity.

### Sacred Geometry Language of the Angels

Richard Heath

Inner Traditions, 2021

Hb, 278pp, \$40.00. ISBN 9781644111185

What John Michell used to call 'sacred geometry', author Richard Heath an 'angelic science' coded into the plans and structures of ancient holy monuments using the mathematic principles established by the Pythagoreans and other illumined geometers. In this beautifully illustrated thesis, Heath shows precisely how number, proportion and astronomy were inter-related in cultures all over the world to express the ideals of divine wisdom. The book not only demonstrates these processes with photos and diagrams but also shows why this 'science' is important and must not be lost.

### More Sex, Better Zen, Faster Bullets The Encyclopedia of Hong Kong Film

Stefan Hammond & Mike Wilkins, eds

Headpress, 2020

Pb, 343pp, £22.99. ISBN 9781909394643

This must be the most comprehensive encyclopædia of the modern Chinese (mainly Hong Kong) cinema yet, compiled and expanded from previous books by the 11 contributors; some of them worked in that industry, but all are united in their love of this dynamic and creative genre with its technical innovations and martial arts skills. Eighteen chapters cover the major types of movies, from historical dramas to crime and sex to the heroic fantasy settings and, of

course, there's a focus on the skills of the stuntmen. Attention is given to an extensive list of actors, writers and directors and their studios, with memorials to many of the now deceased. The authors plot the history of the Chinese movie industry as its wares (and Hollywood remakes) spread out into the wider world from post-WWII Chinese communities in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The individual movie discussions eschew academic seriousness for a joyful celebration of the sheer daftness of it all (including plots that make no sense, the untranslatable cultural milieu, and (most loved of all) the famous outrageously and unintentionally funny English dubbing. Jackie Chan and Michelle Yeoh provide forewords. A must-have for Chinese film buffs.

### Paranormal Wales

Mark Rees

Amberley 2020

Pb, 96pp, £14.99. ISBN 9781445697161

At FT, we treasure the output of small presses, especially as sources of local history and lore. Local author Mar Rees gives us a tour, as he says, "from the peak of Snowdonia to the depths of the abandoned mines". As you'd expect, this includes castles, ghosts, witches and magicians from the mediæval times to the distant Celtic past. There are more modern tales here too.

### Britain's Haunted Heritage

John West

DB Publishing, 2019

Pb, 192pp, £12.99. ISBN: 9781780916033

Yet another personal selection of (apparently random) ghost tales, written (from the looks of it) for the *Most Haunted* audience. The cover claims — upon no comparative evidence at all — that "Britain is the most haunted place on Earth". The 20 cases are certainly an interesting and varied selection of locations and events, but the breathless prose is off-putting. The introduction by Uri Geller adds nothing to the book, which is a good read but useless as a reference.



## Scandals in Bohemia

A new film about Rosaleen Norton – Australia's once notorious 'Witch of Kings Cross' – is a wonderful celebration of an artist who took control of her own story and created a unique body of work



### The Witch of Kings Cross

Dir Sonia Bible, US 2021  
On digital platforms

For erotic esoteric art in the 20th century, Britain had Austin Osman Spare, the US had Marjorie Cameron – and Australia had Rosaleen (Roie) Norton (1917-1979). *The Witch of Kings Cross* tells her story – not as a mere documentary, nor a biopic, but as a work of dramatic art in itself. It's beautifully filmed with, at its heart, highly erotic, highly expressive interpretations of ritual dance. Actress Kate Elizabeth Laxton plays Norton, looking remarkably like her, as she dances naked with Pan, Lilith and Lucifer. There are interviews with old friends and current academics; readings from Norton's own notebooks; headlines and news stories from the press of the day: "Artist and lover arrested after photographs of bizarre sex act", "World-famous conductor disgraced in pornography scandal"; old footage of Norton herself – and there is a startling cornucopia of her drawings and paintings.

Rosaleen Norton's life was

### *She'd say she was born with pointed ears and a blue mark on her knee*

a battle with authority (see [FT224:48-54](#)). She was born in New Zealand to a middle-class family. She'd later say that she was born in a thunderstorm, with pointed ears and a blue mark on her left knee, which she took as a sign: witch marks. When she was seven her family moved to Sydney, where she insisted on sleeping in a tent in the garden. She was rebellious as a child, committing herself to a Pagan outlook on life at the age of 13. Supporting herself by modelling, in 1934 she went to art school, where she was taught by sculptor Rayner Hoff – himself a very Pagan character: his *Crucifixion of Civilisation*, with a female Christ, designed for a war memorial but never built, was condemned by a Catholic archbishop as "insulting to God".

Kings Cross, where Norton spent most of her life, was the area of Sydney populated by

artists, poets, dancers, bohemians, mavericks, homosexuals, transvestites – the outcasts of a very conservative society. There were nightclubs, strippers, cafés open all night, jazz; it was the intellectual and cultural environment that she craved. She was "an artist of the dark side," says Norton's biographer, occult historian Nevill Drury.

Norton met Gavin Greenlees, a talented young poet; they became lovers. He was gay, which was illegal – as was practising magic, which they did together. The rundown house where they lived, along with others, was often raided by the police on the charge of vagrancy – defined as not having enough money to support yourself – which the police routinely used to harass people.

In 1949, aged 31, she had her first major exhibition in a gallery at Melbourne University – and was charged with exhibiting indecent images. In court, the Crown prosecutor said that "work of this sort could deprave and corrupt the morals of those who saw them." Norton's response was classic: "Obscenity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder." Instead of apologising or backing down she explained what her work was about: "Yes, these artworks show people naked; yes, these artworks show occult practices" – and then adding: "I participate in this sort of activity, and these are the beings who visit me." (She would meet the gods and goddesses in a trance state.) Astonishingly she won the court case.

In 1952 publisher Walter Glover brought out a book of Norton's art and Greenlees's

poetry, and again she hit the headlines. Taken to court, Norton defended her work in terms of Jungian archetypes – but the judge ruled that two of the plates in the book must be removed or blacked out. She sent copies of her book to Einstein, Jung, Gerald Gardner and CS Lewis, and received positive responses.

But this was to lead to further scandal. Sir Eugene Goossens, the British composer and conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, came across *The Art of Rosaleen Norton* and contacted her. He already had an interest in the occult; they became lovers and he took part in sex-magick rituals with her and Greenlees.

But a journalist had stolen from her home a bundle of passionate letters between them which described their sex-magick rituals in detail, and had taken them to the police. On his trips back to London Goossens would go to occult bookshops and Soho art galleries; when he returned to Australia in March 1956 – a year after being knighted by the Queen – he was stopped at Sydney airport, his bags were searched and pornographic materials were found. His career destroyed, he returned to England.

Norton exhibited more paintings, and the police confiscated and burned two of them. This was a clash between the Christian conservative culture of 1950s Australia and "a strong, sexually active artistic woman who identifies as a witch," says the film's writer Jack Sargeant.

Instead of running away from the media attention, or making her art and her behaviour more socially acceptable, she embraced her persona, openly talking about her life as the Witch of Kings Cross in magazine articles headlined "Confessions of a Witch" and "I'm Glad I'm a Witch". By embracing the stereotype, she took control of





the situation, as the film says, defanging the media.

"She was an artist, she was a performer, and she created herself, she invented herself," says Australian artist George Gittoes.

Her witchcraft was certainly her own creation, beginning in her childhood. Her sex-magick was influenced by Crowley, her astonishing artwork by the Kabbalah and by Jung.

Rosaleen Norton's artwork is shocking, not for its overt sexuality but in its intensity; you can't look at it without being drawn into it, and changed by it.

In the artwork, the dance, the imagery and in its intimate portrayal of Norton's life, *The Witch of Kings Cross* is a wonderful evocation of the esoteric and the erotic.

David V Barrett



## Broil

Dir Edward Drake, US 2020  
On digital platforms

Somewhat ironically, for a film with a culinary title and a skilled chef as a main character, *Broil* is a perfect example of an over-egged pudding: not entirely unenjoyable but offering nothing we haven't tasted before and weighed down by its ingredients. The opening is a little bland, as schoolgirl Chase is sent to live with her strict grandfather in his improbably remote and ostentatious mansion, but the upfront way in which the supernatural elements are presented is refreshingly zesty. The film simmers as we are introduced to the large cast of characters, produces a few bubbles as they are drawn together, but then ultimately goes cold when none of their storylines pays off in a satisfactory manner. The meat of the film concerns a power-play in a family of quasi-vampires, their backstory adding a distinct tang which might have saved the dish were it not for the questionable mix of garnishes which end up diluting the flavour. Too much of the action is wasted in aperitifs and hors d'oeuvres, leaving the main course feeling distinctly underwhelming.

Martin Parsons



## THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! ([www.peterlaws.co.uk](http://www.peterlaws.co.uk))

### Karloff at Columbia

Dir Roy William Neil et al, US 1935-1942  
Eureka Classics, £39.99 (Blu-ray)

Creepy, charismatic, tender, psychotic... the many faces of icon Boris Karloff are showcased in this handsome six-movie set spanning 1935 to 1942. Five of the films feature weird medical science, but what keeps this from being called the 'Mad Doctor Collection' is the first: a nifty period piece set in a forbidding castle. Two brothers (one kind, one deviant) reunite after many years, despite a prophecy that one will kill the other in... *The Black Room*. It's a lush melodrama, and beautifully shot too, but Karloff's versatility shines brightest in this dual role, utterly convincing as the equal yet very opposite siblings.

The scary science kicks in with *The Man They Couldn't Hang*, in which Karloff plays a kind-hearted doctor who experiments with raising the dead; not out of greed or desire for Frankenstein-like power, but for the good of science. When his first attempt at reanimation is interrupted, the authorities assume the corpse in his possession is a murder victim. They refuse to let him revive it, and he's sentenced to hang – but not even his own execution can stop the furious doctor's quest for revenge. This sci-fi edged horror tale is silly for sure – "Weird! Fascinating! Horrifying!" screamed the poster of the time – but Karloff brings a certain poetry to the schlock.

*The Man with Nine Lives* finds Karloff as a pioneer of cryogenics (or 'frozen therapy' as they call it here). Thawed out after 10 years in a subterranean ice room, he's



*It's silly for sure, but Karloff brings a certain poetry to the schlock*

on the verge of a world-changing discovery, but the snooty authorities can't help screwing it up. Can you see a theme developing here? It's an impressive chiller, with intense twists and a palpable sense of claustrophobia.

There are distinct Jekyll and Hyde vibes in *Before I Hang*, where a doctor seeks to halt the ageing process... until a transfusion of murderer's blood turns him homicidal. It's a classic trope in horror, this, in which the

consciousnesses of a human (usually a criminal) gets passed on through transplants of eyes, heads, limbs or blood. Yet once again Karloff's sincerity makes this one of the classier entries in what we might call the 'Terror by Transfusion' genre.

In *The Devil Commands* Karloff returns as a scientist desperate to communicate with his dead wife even though "man is not supposed to know these things!" With some dazzling (for the time) effects, a loping assistant and a shady spirit medium, it's the closest to a straight-ahead horror movie in the set, and includes a striking opening sequence of a rain battered house by the sea.

That Karloff's Mad Doctor cycle was running out of steam by 1942 is shown in the final entry, where the studio opted for comedy. *The Boogie Man Will Get You* might be a parody of the previous films, but it still manages to entertain and amuse. In the end, the mad science in these movies isn't so mad after all. Karloff usually pursues noble aims with amazing success. And yet, as Frankenstein discovered, it's superstitious resistance to progress that is the real villain here. It certainly seems to be what gets people killed.

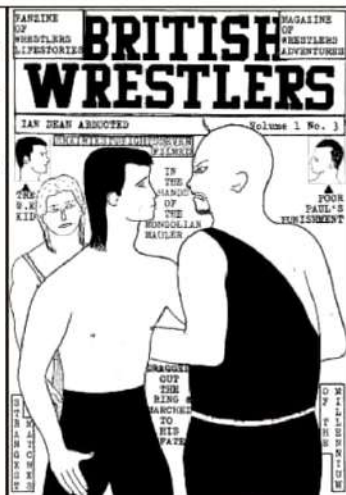
Extras include Karloff on Radio episodes, a collectors' booklet and wonderfully informative commentaries from the likes of Kim Newman and Jonathan Rigby; and the crisp Blu-ray transfers make you forget you're watching films that are close to (gasp) 100 years old.





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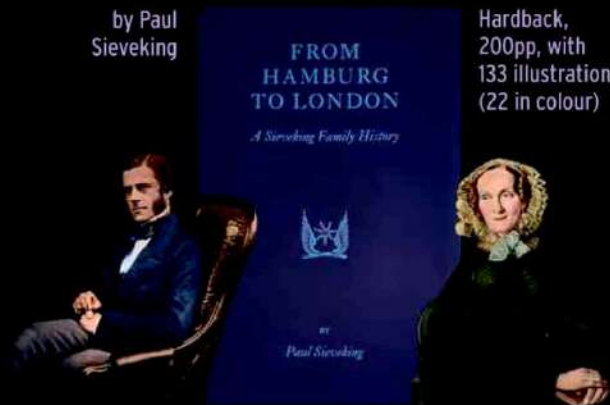
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# LETTERS

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## Very small aliens

Tiny aliens in a fleet of tiny spaceships, as imagined by Douglas Adams and noted by Andy Kelly [FT403:67] are extremely unlikely. The reason is that a technological civilisation capable of building spaceships must have mastered fire. Without such skill the raw materials could not be processed. An ant-sized alien close enough to a fire to do useful work would be incinerated. For the same reason technologically advanced aliens can't be exclusively aquatic. It is always possible, I suppose, that a race of big aliens might build the spaceships while another race of tiny aliens does the space travel. But Occam's Razor rejects such multiplication of hypothetical entities. We might therefore confidently expect that aliens capable of visiting Earth will be terrestrial and at least a foot tall, with proportionate manipulative appendages.

**Nick Guitard**  
Poundstock, Cornwall

## UK fanzines

Following on my review of Steve Moore's *Selene* [FT387:64], David Sutton's correction [FT389:71] and Owen Whiteoak's further correction [FT399:72], I should have qualified in my review that, to the best of my knowledge, *Orpheus* was the first UK comics fanzine, specifically. Nevertheless, I've enjoyed the discussion of the history of the UK fanzine to which this honest error has serendipitously led.

**Eric Hoffman**  
Vernon, Connecticut

## Aura migraines

There follows a conjecture regarding forteen experiences of all stripes, in particular UFO sightings of a specific kind.

As a sufferer of aura migraines, I've become accustomed to the optical disturbances that presage the other symptoms: crippling headache, photosensitivity, nausea, exhaustion, etc. Other sufferers' experiences of these auras are apparently very varied (lending credence



## Giant rat of Abercych

The "giant rat" on display that was really a coypu [FT397:70] reminded me of a creature that scared the village of Abercych in the 1950s until it was killed with a pitchfork and

identified as a South American coypu. The stuffed rodent resides in the village pub, the Nag's Head.  
**Marc Poole**  
Cardigan, Wales

to my suspicion that "migraine" is really just a term clinicians use to denote Weird Brain Stuff Nobody Understands). I mention the heterogeneity just to be clear that I don't pretend to speak for all migraine sufferers.

The auras I experience begin as tiny blemishes on my vision, just off-centre, at first easily mistaken for those lingering 'blobs' we all experience when a bright light has flashed across our sight. These blemishes, however, do not fade, but expand. It's important to note these aren't simply patches of colour in front of my vision. They are absences – gaps in the visual information my brain is receiving. One can sense a fuzzy sort of outline, and sometimes a clearly defined shape, yet there's nothing inside it. Not just whiteness or blackness, but nothing. (Descriptive language, as you'd imagine, somewhat fails at this point.)

On two recent occasions, while these symptoms were in full force, I noticed that the blemish had formed a perfect equilateral triangle. They sat in slightly different positions relative to the centre of my vision on the two occasions. I won't even try to guess what was going on in my optic nerve or my brain – but it

occurred to me, as I stood there trying to figure out the quickest way to get to my medication, what this might feel like to someone who'd never experienced it before. Someone staring, say, at an otherwise empty night sky; or at an expanse of still water; or the shadows in the corner of an unlit bedroom; or into the heart of a flame. In both cases the blemish had faded and gone within five minutes, and on one of the two occasions I was even lucky enough to experience no further symptoms.

I imply nothing beyond a general forteen "hmm", with perhaps just the tiniest indulgent observation that the inefficiencies of the human brain are quite as rich and weird as those of the supernatural spheres, and the former might just lie behind many more of the latter than we care to admit.

**Simon Spurrier**  
Margate, Kent

## Weird ghosts

Richard Freeman's *The Weirdest Ghosts Of All* [FT403:53] brought to mind some other weird hauntings I had read about. One appeared in Clarence Daniel's book *Haunted Derbyshire*, which

tells the tale of the ghost of Old Ned who tries to hang himself from a tree, but he fails when the branch snaps, then his ghost goes to the next tree where the branch snaps again, and so he continues off into the distance.

I remember a couple of other odd tales from Marc Alexander's book *Haunted Houses You May Visit*. One tells of a headless ghost descending a staircase whilst kicking his decapitated head like a football. Another concerns the sound of flapping wings like a giant invisible bird. Bizarrely, I have a first-hand account from husband-and-wife geologists, Art and Peggy Palmer, doing research at Crystal Cave in West Virginia, who also heard the sound of flapping wings (as if from a giant, invisible bird). They never found an explanation for that.

**Andy Owens**  
Halifax, West Yorkshire

## James Randi

The obituary of James Randi [FT401:28-30] described how he offered a prize of \$10,000 for anyone who could produce proof of psychic powers, with himself to be the arbiter of what constituted proof, and that it was never claimed. Now, it is often said that spiritual gifts cannot be used for material gain. If this is true, then any psychic who tried to use his powers to acquire a large financial reward would find that those powers deserted him – so Randi's money was quite safe.

**Gareth J Medway**  
London

Was I alone in detecting a note of bitterness in Alan Murdie's obituary for Randi? On the one hand he recognised that Randi was a figure of considerable importance deserving three pages, but at the same time the task of commemorating Randi's achievements seemed rather to stick in his craw. Is Murdie himself one of the "many others" he cites who considered that Randi was "a pest of the first order" and when he was encased in a block of ice, "wished later he had remained in it"? His claim that Randi was "popular with

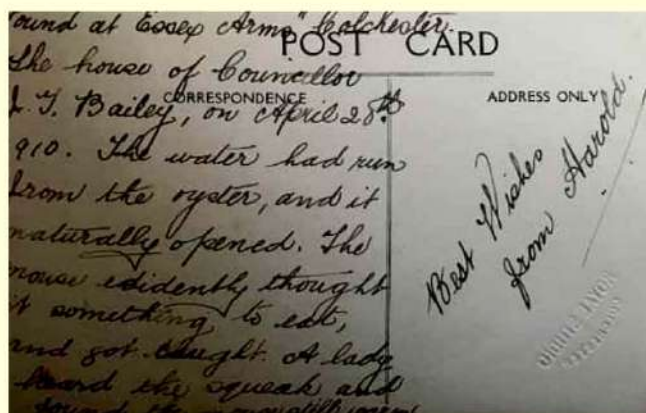


# LETTERS



## Mouse trapped

The inscription on this postcard reads: "Found at 'Essex Arms' Colchester, the house of Councillor J. T. Bailey, on April



28th 1910. The water had run from the oyster, and it naturally opened. The mouse evidently thought it something to eat, and got caught. A lady heard the squeak and found the mouse

still warm. Best wishes from Harold." Somebody obviously thought it worth a trip to the local photographic studio to capture the bizarre scene for posterity.  
**Mark Graham** Huddersfield

a growing number of younger skeptical admirers, for whom [he] appeared to fulfil an emotional need" is certainly a rather backhanded compliment to include in an obituary.

**Martin Stubbs**  
London

*Alan Murdie responds: "I actually quite liked Randi and admired him in one sense. Indeed, I do rather wish I had met him in person, in the same way I quite liked another American skeptic, the late Bob Baker, another barnstorming though more cerebral critic, regardless of whether or not I agreed with him. One of the interesting things is how so many people demonstrated such a strong and essentially emotional reaction to Randi, one way or the other, which is why I think he deserved a lengthy obituary. One can learn a lot about the sociology of the paranormal and the pop media treatment of it from such characters over the years."*

## Dyatlov coincidence

Regarding the Dyatlov Pass mystery [FT403:4]: I was struck by the coincidence that according to the Sky dramatisation of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the main culprit for

the accident was the deputy chief engineer, Anatoly Dyatlov. He died early from radiation-related illness. In the 1959 Dyatlov Pass incident, "very high levels of radiation were found on the bodies and clothes of four of the skiers, and witnesses at the funeral reported that their skin was a nut brown or orange, as if suntanned" [FT377:4]. The skiing group leader was Igor Dyatlov, 23.

**Martin Corlett**  
Newtownards, Co. Down

## Whiteboys

Rob Gandy's article on the Aintree Spectres [FT399:38-42] includes speculation that a mysterious group called the 'Lily White boys' might be involved, although his further investigations into the nature of this group came up short. The name reminded me of an entry in John Michael Greer's reference book *The Element Encyclopedia of Secret Societies* (Harper Element, 2006), entitled 'Whiteboys' (pp533-534).

To quote the opening paragraph in full: "The first known Irish political secret society, the Whiteboys, first appeared in Tipperary in the autumn of 1761. Enclosure Acts passed by the Irish Parliament permitted local landlords to seize village common pasture for their own use. In response, bands

of local farmers gathered at night to destroy the ditches and fences erected by the landlords. Members of the bands took to wearing white shirts as a uniform, making recognition easy at night, and this gave them their name: Buachaillí Bana in Irish, Whiteboys in English".

The entry states that the Whiteboys were active in bursts from the 1760s to the 1780s, undertaking acts of civil disobedience that provided an outlet for rural Irish Catholics to vent their spleen against a variety of injustices and oppressions. These included excessive tithes and dues paid to both the Catholic and Protestant churches of Ireland, along with "abusive landlords and extortionate rents for farmland". Naturally persecuted by the authorities of the time, the Whiteboys operated as a loose-knit secret society. Organised in local groups led by a 'captain', members pledged an initiation oath to uphold the societies' nocturnal activities, and would suffer serious retributions if they transgressed their membership.

The Whiteboys achieved some political victories in 1785, when their protests against tithes and dues "won the support of large sections of the middle and upper classes", leading to reforms that arguably prevented landlords from engaging in evictions

similar to the notorious Highland clearances during the same period. Greer states that the Whiteboys were superseded by more radical, nationalistic Irish protest groups that sprang up in the late 18th century. Apart from this, he notes that their most lasting legacy is a distinctly sinister one: "The Whiteboy custom of assembling by night in white garments, however, spread to the American South by way of Irish immigrants, and was adopted after the Civil War by the Ku Klux Klan."

Idle speculation in relation to Mr Gandy's article: could the 'Lily White Boys' be some kind of local group derived from these Irish Whiteboys? As the Liverpool area was a major immigration point for Irish fleeing the Great Famine of the 1840s, perhaps the Spectres are some kind of secret society amongst Merseysiders of Irish descent, dedicated to preserving or honouring aspects of their Hibernian heritage (or with motivations linked to the vagaries of modern Irish politics)? Admittedly the descriptions of the Spectres' activities sound more cultic than radical, but perhaps the post-war Whiteboys had metamorphosed into a Gaelic neo-Pagan group casting spells against Unionists and the Reverend Ian Paisley...

**Dean Ballinger**  
Hamilton, New Zealand



# SIMULACRA CORNER



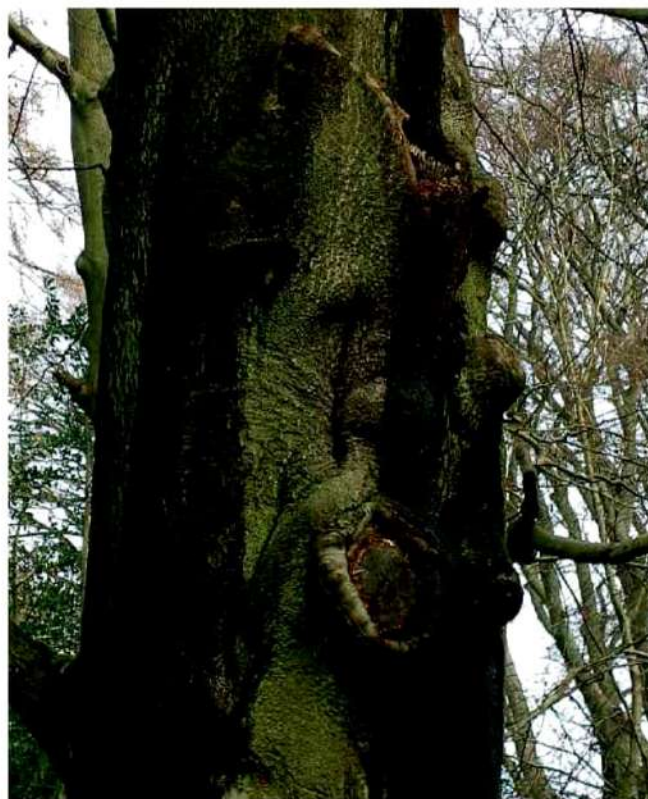
Ian Jarvis spotted this distressed tree in woodland near Fairburn, North Yorkshire, in 2020. He commented: "It's on its way to audition for the part of Ghostface in the new remake of *Scream*".



Lizzie Harrington found this surprised-looking tree in Cumbria in 2019.



Alistair Dabbs noticed this dead, knotty tree in Sicily in June 2018. "It was a scream," he said.



This tree face was photographed by Alan Vickers in Styal Woods near Stockport, south Manchester.

*We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 66598, London N11 9EN or to [sieveking@forteantimes.com](mailto:sieveking@forteantimes.com).*



# It Happened to Me...

## A helpful poltergeist

Most of the stories I have heard about poltergeists are negative, so here is one that I believe tried to help my flatmates and me. It started as low-level annoyance. However, a year after I moved to the flat it seemed to me that the polt tried to warn me of impending danger, implying it had some sort of premonition. This of course is my subjective interpretation.

I am a professional artist, but my greatest love in life is the natural world – animals, insects, botany and astronomy. I was never afraid of the dark. I often went wild camping by myself and had lived happily alone in a derelict attic in a three-storey empty building prior to moving to the place where these events took place. I wasn't interested in the supernatural.

At the end of my first year at art school in Farnham, Surrey, in 1985, I was lucky enough to be offered a room in a very dilapidated flat. Finding anywhere affordable in ultra-posh Farnham was absolute gold dust. The flat had a fantastic pedigree as a student home. It was the upper storey of a detached building on a main road, above a tiny transport cafe and car showroom. Though it was quite an ugly building, resembling a rendered concrete block, it was very old and I believe had once been a coaching inn.

I had two fantastic years there with my friends, but I was plagued by something that for the first year frightened me. It started when I agreed to swap rooms with a very down-to-earth flatmate, who said she felt depressed in her room. From that time I was disturbed by vague noises, rustling, bumping, scratching and mechanical ticking that came from every corner of my room.

The disturbing thing about the noises was the sense of deliberation – for instance a digital that would start



*“The loud bashings and bangings started to ramp up and became weekly”*

to ‘tick’, which was impossible. The noises seemed choreographed to attract my attention. To begin with, they would typically start up when I finished work for the evening and prepared for bed, but always wide awake and alert. I would go through the usual “it’s just my imagination” thoughts. I would climb into bed, keeping the light on. There would be a pause and then the clock would start to tick again. If I got out of bed and looked at it, it would stop. Back into bed, a pause, and it would start again. I did endless experiments, such as inviting friends to listen to it. I replaced it with another clock – and it happened again. The noises were not caused by mice, rats or deathwatch bee-

gles, pipes or relayed sounds from other rooms, all of which I had experienced in other places. The sounds could come out of a coat, an empty corner of the room, or my paint box. When I walked towards the sound or pressed my ear to the wall, the sound would start up somewhere else. This repeated night after night. The noises never woke me up at this time – the trouble was getting to sleep at all!

I never got a sense of evil, but felt the timing of the sounds indicated that whatever was causing them was somehow aware of me, and the implication was quite scary. I contacted the previous tenants, who had lived there for over 10 years, and they said there was a ghost, but it was a friendly one, and they hadn't mentioned it as we were quite young art students and they didn't want to frighten us. I wasn't very reassured.

During one memorable night, when two of my flatmates were away, and the third, a teetotaller, had got blind drunk and passed out in her

room, the power went off – no lights and we didn't have a phone. (We used the call box across the road.) I was working in my room – about 10pm, when from all around the flat a series of huge crashings and thumps started echoing along walls and passageways. I ran into my friend's room and tried to wake her, to no avail. I sat by her bed for an hour listening to the sounds and by now terrified, but in the end I felt I had to know what was going on. I grabbed the candle and tried to follow the sounds as they bashed along the wall. I found nothing and spent the rest of the night guarding my friend and trying to read a PG Wodehouse book by candlelight to cheer myself up and block out the sounds.

From then on, over the course of a few months, the loud bashings and bangings started to ramp up and became weekly. My flatmates were often out or away, so didn't hear it or dismissed it as old house noises. The sounds came from the walls, the ceiling, and in passageways that didn't connect. I traced all the pipes in the flat – and investigated boilers, etc – but nothing mechanical seemed to be going on. The flat was sparsely furnished with wall-mounted pipes, no central heating (just a tiny water heater in the kitchen and bathroom), and no cavity walls. The noises just seemed to come from everywhere.

I would peer through the windows of the café and showroom below, but they were empty and quiet. During the holidays my flatmates returned home and one left college. The rooms were sublet to new tenants. I moved to a room at the end of a passageway that felt safer, but the sounds followed me and now it was night after night, getting louder and wilder.

One night, at about three in the morning, I finally cracked, jumped out of bed and rushed out of my room in a complete and utter rage, ready to confront whatever was tormenting



me, come what may. Outside my room was a man with a baseball bat. The new tenants were a young couple. Her criminal ex-boyfriend and his brother had broken down the front door and had come to attack them. I jumped on the man with the bat and we had a wrestling match, while his brother attacked the girl as she slept. She sustained serious head injuries and was hospitalised, but luckily her boyfriend woke in time to stop the attack. If the two brothers had not been interrupted, things could have been even worse.

From that moment on I felt differently about the poltergeist and thanked it. Without the build-up that led to my complete rush of rage I could never have fought off the intruder. After that night the bashings and bangings stopped and returned to a cheeky rustling or bumping. I had a sense that the poltergeist was pleased. It was almost a sense of achievement. From then on the noises were like someone just mooching about, doing the housework, in the background. I was OK with it.

It has been suggested that the banging sounds were the attackers exploring the building externally – but the couple had only rented the room the previous week, whereas the crashing noises had been going on for at least a month and probably more. Besides, the flat was basically a box with four external walls, and it would have required ladders to reach the roof. Despite my making peace with my poltergeist, it was actually a huge distraction at the time, especially during the first year, and I would never like to repeat the experience. I have lots of writing from the time as I keep a diary, but I have never read those entries, probably because I don't want to "go back there". The flat still exists, though I have no idea of its subsequent history.

Anyway, thanks for all the great stories in FT. I really love the fact that they are not sensationalised, and every explanation for unusual events or phenomena is explored – it makes for a really interesting read.

**Patti Keane**  
By email



## Doubling up

Whenever I pick up my mobile phone, which is set to a 24-hour clock, more often than not I find the time is displayed as the same two numbers. There have been days when every time I look at the phone it will read, for example, 11.11 and later 14.14 and then 16.16 and 23.23. This can last for three or more days in succession. Its occurrence may be a mere coincidence, it being so random, or it could be that I am being unconsciously directed to look at the phone at a particular time, for some particular reason, perhaps controlled from some other dimension. Maybe it's a code or a set of coordinates for something. Only once when writing this letter did I glance (by chance?) at the numerical clock in the top right corner of this phone. It read 17.17 and remained so for over 30 seconds.

**Stefan Badham**  
Portsmouth, Hampshire

## Summoning UFOs

Peter Brookesmith began his UFO Files/Flying Sorcery column last June [FT393:32] with a piece about Dr Steven Greer's new app for contacting UFOs, and people paying several hundred dollars to "go out into the countryside where he would wave a lighted torch at the sky, and claim to have attracted a UFO or two." He says he can't say if the payees were satisfied with the results of their paid expeditions into the countryside. I can answer that question.

Around 1993, I went to Black Rock Mountain State Park in North Georgia with Greer and

a dozen or so people interested in trying his protocols, a form of meditation that "vectors in" UFOs. Greer came to speak to UFO Forum, a local group in Atlanta, Georgia, that brought various speakers on the topic of UFOs. Greer impressed me with two things he said. First, we aren't interacting with extraterrestrials because we haven't openly invited them to do so. Second, and I can quote him: "The sum of all consciousness in the Universe is one." I had been thinking along the same lines. As part of his presentation, he said UFOs are more likely to interact with you if you go where they're working. North Georgia had, and continues to have, a lot of UFO activity, so an expedition with Greer to Black Rock Mountain State Park to "vector in" UFOs was offered for \$20.

Our group of UFO enthusiasts travelled to the park and arrived at dusk. At an altitude of 3,640ft (1,109m), the park offered a great vantage point with little light pollution and an 80-mile (130km) view of the surrounding, heavily forested area. After it was completely dark, Greer led us through the meditation steps. I did the meditation several times and then lay back on the grass, watched the sky and waited. I saw the occasional satellite come over the horizon, pass overhead, and disappear across the far horizon. I also focused on stars to gauge the degree to which my natural eye movements made the stars seem to move if I stared at them long enough. I was watching what I thought was a satellite pass overhead when it stopped. Then a bright, star-like point of light came in

from the opposite horizon and joined the first one, followed by another four. Now six lights, brighter than the satellites and looking maybe as high up, were clustered above us. I was dumbfounded.

I glanced at Greer, who said: "Ask them to do something". So I mentally asked the lights to do a loop. A single light peeled off from the group made a loop, and returned to the cluster. Then the other lights started doing aerobatic manoeuvres as various members of our group mentally asked them to perform manoeuvres. One light did a figure eight; another made the shape of a triangle; another shot off to one side before zipping back to the group. These were much bigger movements than the tiny movements I had noticed while staring at stars.

I looked again at Greer in astonishment and asked, "Is this for us?" He nodded, then he took his spotlight and drew a triangle in the sky, something he had done successfully in Florida when three lights took their places at each of the points of the triangle he had drawn in the sky. The lights did not do this; but for 15 minutes, six lights in the sky did what I and the people around me mentally asked them to do. Then they paused as a group before each light shot off incredibly fast across the sky in various directions. Then they were gone. We stood there, dumbfounded, talking excitedly and asking if this really just happened. I had a hard time accepting this, but it was undeniable that we apparently called in six intelligent somethings and they interacted with us.

Greer then told us he had arranged for us to go to a nearby farm with a huge field, where he hoped to coax a craft to land. Once there, we did the protocols and waited. And waited. But nothing else happened that night, and at around 4am we started leaving for the perilous drive down narrow mountain roads in the dark and the long drive back to Atlanta. I've only told two people about this and I'm sharing it here because I believe Dr Greer is legit and knows what he's talking about. So, to answer Mr Brookesmith's question, yes, I do feel I got my money's worth.





## Spirit painting

Regarding 'The Medium is the Message' by Robert Weinberg [FT401:40-45]: here is a painting given to my aunt of her spirit guide. Her mother, my grandmother, was a medium and often held meetings, and I think someone at a séance created the painting. The style is reminiscent of the 1930s when I presume it was done – it seems to say '1931' under the signature. My aunt would have been 35 at the time. On the back, written in a childlike script, are the words "As the moon and stars are fixed in eternity so is my love for you".

My grandmother had a lot of success with her mediumship. At one point she managed to locate a lost ring belonging to my mother, her daughter-in-law. My mother had searched for this ring for a long time and my grandmother told her to search in the top drawer of her chest of drawers. Sure enough, the ring was stuck in the finger of a glove. My grandfather was a GP and had a practice in Worthing. He used to see his patients in a room at the front of the building while my grandmother used to see her clients in a room in the same building, and it was claimed she had more success in healing people than my grandfather. I found this out recently from a relative I found on a family history site. My grandmother died when I was two.

**Susi Jefford**  
Colchester, Essex

## War ghosts

I recently came upon a photocopy of the following news clipping from the *Sunday Dispatch* (26 Oct 1941), which George Ives (1867-1950), friend of Oscar Wilde, had stuck in one of his 45 scrapbooks. It seems a bit far-fetched!

### B.B.C. GIRLS ARE DRIVEN FROM HOME BY GHOSTS ANSWER TO LAST NIGHT'S RADIO RIDDLE

A B.B.C. hostel for girls in Bristol was closed in March this year because of ghosts. "Not one ghost," Miss G. Methvea [typo for Ruthven] Brownlee said last night, "but seven. I saw them myself." Miss Brownlee is now in charge of a B.B.C. hostel at Weston-super-Mare.

In peace time she is a photographer well known throughout the West country. Last night, when she was giving a five-minutes talk for Fire Guards in the Forces Programme, listeners heard these words: "It was a ghost, but that is another story. Goodnight." Everyone wanted to know the "other story". Well, here it is – as told in Miss Brownlee's own words to the *Sunday Dispatch*:

"I must start with the bomb which fell on my own home in Charlotte-street at 6.20 p.m. on November 24 last year. The bomb destroyed all I had, and I felt that my one salvation would be to find a job. I found one at Oldbury House, which the B.B.C. had taken over as a hostel for girls. There were 28 or 30 of them, all aged between 18 and 26, and we had a staff of seven. The house is a very old one, reputed to have been used by Prince Rupert as his headquarters when Bristol was besieged in the days of Cromwell. Underground tunnels are said to run from the house to the centre of the city and to the old Bristol Fort.

### THE MONK

"I slept on the ground floor by the front door. I was awakened frequently by thuds, by heavy dragging sounds, and by the sobbing of a child. Then – I saw the ghosts. There was a very tall, thin man, dressed like a monk,

in long dark robes, with a bunch of keys hanging from a girdle at his waist. There was a little old woman, dressed rather like a housekeeper of the same period. Finally, there were five ladies, always together, dressed alike in clinging robes with high head-dresses.

"I discovered that there had been at one time an opening from my room to the stables beyond. It was here that I first saw the monk. After that, at frequent intervals, I saw not only the monk and the housekeeper also, and the five women together. The women seemed to stand on a balcony, as if in a vision. They talked agitatedly among themselves, and in the background there was the monk again, seemingly pleading for something.

### EIGHT SAW IT

"I said nothing about all this to the girls. I did not think it would be good to rouse their imaginations. But one day several girls came to me and told me of things they had seen. Their experiences corresponded exactly with my own. Eight girls saw these presences in the house exactly as I did. The other 20 experienced nothing at all. Often two or three of the girls saw the figures simultaneously.

"On other occasions one girl would see a figure coming through the door, and a minute or so later another girl would see it at the end of the passage, and later still yet another girl would see it at the foot of the stairs. Since then, so far as I know, no one has slept at the place, although I believe the rooms are used in the daytime by the Ministry of Works."

• In World War II, my father, Lance Sieveking, was West Regional Programme Director of the BBC, based in Bristol. He recalled: "Bristol and Clifton were full of friendly people warm and hospitable, who let me share in their interests, and the kindest and most full of interests was Brownie – as Gladys

Ruthven Brownlee was universally known. She was about 50, and tirelessly, enthusiastically energetic, the centre of a score of social activities. She ran the Arts Club and Theatre, at the corner of Charlotte Street and Park Street."

On 12 May 1940, Brownie suggested my father cycle to a village called Rickford, about 11 miles outside Bristol, to meet an artist called Maisie Meiklejohn. They got married in 1949 on the anniversary of their first meeting, and I was born later that year.

**Paul Sieveking**

FT founding co-editor, London

Alan Murdie comments: World War II certainly produced some colourful ghosts. These included a monk with the ears of a dog described on a Brains' Trust broadcast in December 1943; the phantom chicken of Pond Square, Highgate (related by Peter Underwood in *Haunted London*, 1972, and Jeffrey Vallance, FT401:46); and a fair few black dog sightings. Talking monks were a feature of this era until the 1960s, but generally with a more spiritual content implied. Then there was the poltergeist outbreak associated with the moving of the Witch Stone at Great Leighs, Essex (*Sunday Pictorial*, 15 Oct 1944) and the poltergeist at Gill House, Aspartia, Cumbria (*Daily Mail*, 3 Aug 1943). Miss Brownlee's Oldbury House haunting starts to approach the later claims concerning Sanford Orcas Manor in Dorset.





# PECULIAR POSTCARDS

**JAN BONDESON** shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past celebrates the short career and fast driving of the diminutive 'Davy' Jones of Lisburn.



## 15. THE IRISH TOM THUMB

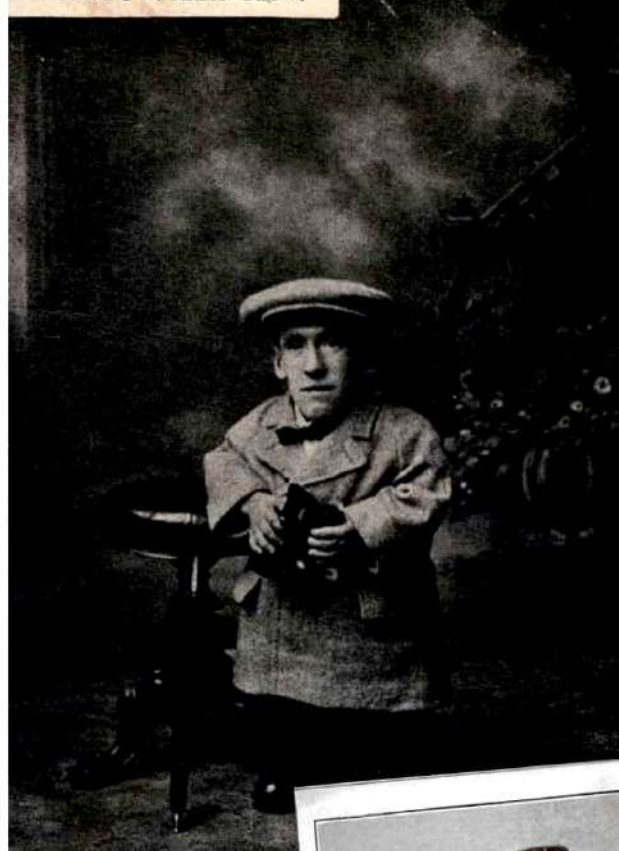
Robert David Jones was born in Lisburn, Ireland, in 1903, the son of the painter John Jones and his wife Lizzie. He was of normal size and weight at birth, but failed to develop normally: he would grow to be just 24 inches (61cm) tall. He had at least four normal siblings: brother John and sisters Annie, Lizzie and Sarah. Sadly, his mother died young, and his father followed her into the grave in 1921. After rudimentary schooling in Lisburn, young 'Davy' Jones decided to make his fortune on the stage. He signed a contract with Bostock's Menagerie in the 1920s, being billed as 'The Irish Tom Thumb' and 'Bostock's Man in Miniature'. At least three postcards, today rather scarce, were printed to advertise him, but the show was never a success and he soon returned to Lisburn.

To earn his keep, Davy Jones had to find a job: he got hold of a pony and trap and started a business delivering firewood and coal in the area round Lisburn. Once, when a schoolboy came to tease him, Davy floored him with a well-aimed block of wood. He also assisted a local milkman on his rounds, filling the tins with pints and half-pints as well as he could. He earned enough money to be able to marry his normal-sized wife Jean, and they soon had a son named David William. Davy's greatest problem was his very short and bowed legs, which made locomotion difficult. In 1965, he took delivery of a Cheetah Cub engine-driven children's car, made in fibreglass to resemble a classic Jaguar. Many people in Lisburn could remember him driving along in his tiny car, on the busy roads next to lorries and double-decker buses.

Davy was popular in Lisburn, where he had many friends. He

### THE IRISH TOM THUMB.

Bostock's Wonder Show.



THE IRISH TOM THUMB.



The Irish Tom Thumb. Bostock's wonder man compared with an ordinary sized person.

stayed away from showbusiness after his disappointing stint at Bostock's, although he once made an appearance as one of the dwarfs in a performance of *Snow White* at the Grand Opera House. He was a regular at the Smithfield House, one of the oldest pubs in town, and sometimes amused his drinking companions by taking his seat on a pint glass. Once, a friend invited him to visit his house in town, but the little fellow made a wrong turn on the stairs and went into the bedroom of a visiting maiden aunt by mistake; many years later, the friend could still remember the desperate screaming emanating from the room, announcing that the aunt had seen "the devil himself!" In spite of his dangerous driving in his little car, Davy Jones died of natural causes in 1970, leaving his wife and child well supported. His car was exhibited at the Ulster Transport Museum for a while, but has since been put in storage. Since Davy was of normal size at birth, he did not suffer from primordial dwarfism, but rather some extreme variant of chondrodystrophy, with an abnormally short trunk for this condition, and very short legs.

*This is an edited extract from Jan Bondeson's book The Lion Boy and Other Medical Curiosities (Amberley Publishing, Stroud 2018).*

TOP: 'Davy' Jones in civilian clothes. FAR LEFT: An unposted card featuring the Irish Tom Thumb during his brief show business career, in pseudo-military attire. LEFT: Another card, with a tall person added.



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To minimise the time spent on preparing clippings for a Fort Sort, we ask that you cut them out and not fold them too small. Mark each clip (on the front, where possible) with the source, date and your name, so that we can credit you in the listing (right) when we use the material. For UK local and overseas clips, please give the town of publication. For foreign language clips, we appreciate brief translations. To avoid confusion over day and month, please write the date in this form: 1 MAY 2021. If you send photocopies, copy on one side of the paper only.

Mail to: Fortean Times, PO Box 66598, LONDON, N11 9EN  
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# WHY FORTEAN?



**FORTEAN TIMES** is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, FT is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. FT toes no party line.

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(who classify clippings placed in the Archives for Fortean Research)

Regular Fort Sorts are currently on lockdown hiatus – but please continue to send in your clippings to the new address: PO Box 66598, London, N11 9EN

## CLIPPING CREDITS FOR FT405

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# PHENOMENOMIX

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# FORTEAN TIMES 406

ON SALE 20 MAY 2021

## STRANGE DEATHS

### UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Last October a Filipino policeman was killed raiding an illegal cockfight when one of the birds slashed his femoral artery with its gaff, a steel blade fixed next to its leg [FT401:80]. A similar death took place in India in late February. Thanugula Satish, 45, bled to death before he could get to hospital. His bird leapt in the air and slashed his groin with its 3in gaff. Satish had organised the bout in Lothunur village in Telangana, southern India. Cockfighting is illegal in India and 15 men linked to the event were on the run. *Times, Metro, 1 Mar 2021.*

Former bus driver Sean McDonnell, of Raheen, Co Limerick, organised a bestiality encounter with his dog and a woman he had met online. The 43-year-old woman travelled to McDonnell's home where she engaged in sexual intercourse with his Alsatian, but died shortly afterwards, possibly due to an allergic reaction to the dog's sperm. McDonnell, 58, was convicted of buggery with his dog but was spared jail. The judge ruled that while "even in these tolerant times, acts of bestiality are socially repugnant," a custodial sentence was inappropriate. The unfortunate woman had come to his home of her own free will, and neither had any idea that an allergic reaction might occur. McDonnell lost his bus driver job and was disowned by his family. Local reaction was such that he was compelled to move to the UK where he sought counselling at the well-known Priory Clinic. Due to financial difficulties, he was unable to continue this treatment and was now embarking upon "long-term counselling" elsewhere. McDonnell's name was added to the sex offender register which disqualifies anyone from having a haulage licence for a vehicle carrying over nine passengers. The dog was later destroyed. *irishcentral.com, 15 Dec; limerickpost.ie, 19 Dec 2012.*

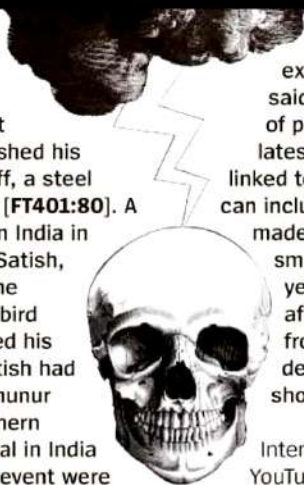
A father-to-be died after a device he was building for his child's gender-reveal party exploded. Christopher Pekny, 28, from the town of Liberty, New York, was assembling the device when it exploded, killing Mr Pekny and injuring his brother Michael, 27. Gender-reveal parties are celebrations when expectant mothers announce whether they are going to have a girl or a boy. Police have not specified what device caused the

explosion, but a spokesman said it consisted of some kind of pipe. Mr Pekny's death is the latest in a series of catastrophes linked to gender-reveal parties, which can include announcements being made with fireworks and coloured smoke grenades. Earlier this year a Michigan man was killed after being struck by shrapnel from "a small cannon type device" fired during a baby shower. *BBC News, 23 Feb 2021.*

Intending to film themselves for a YouTube prank, Timothy Wilks, 20, and a friend armed themselves with butcher knives and approached a group of people in a Nashville, Tennessee, car park. Among the group was David Starnes Jr., 23, who promptly shot Mr Wilks dead in self-defence. *nbcnews.com, 6 Feb 2021.*

A French couple, each driving a different car, were killed in a head-on collision with each other near their home in Nouailles, northern France, in January 1985. Initially amazed at the coincidence, the police were trying to eliminate the possibility of a double suicide. Philippe Boverly, 43, and his wife Dominique, 37, appeared to have left their home nearby the accident late at night, separately. One of them was driving on the wrong side of the road. But due to the carnage it was impossible to say who it was. One theory was that the wife wanted to give her husband a surprise and meet on the way home. *Eve. Standard, 25 Jan 1985.*

"The following very singular and melancholy accident happened at Weedon Beck, in Northamptonshire, on Tuesday last: One John Kidesley, passing by the door of Thomas Moreton, threw four small fishes into the house, when Elizabeth Dunn, a neighbour, going in, too up one of them, a perch, and by squeezing endeavoured to kill it; Thomas Butlin, a baker, being in the room, and seeing the transaction, told Dunn, that if she did so again he would put it in her mouth, and holding it towards her face, she opened her mouth, and the fish at the same instant sprung from Butlin's hand into her throat, where it remaining immovable, caused her immediate death." *Leeds Intelligencer, 29 Aug 1780 (original report in Northampton Mercury, 21 Aug 1780).*





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